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"ON, BEAUTY!" CRIED THE ARENA QUEEN, WHILE SHE LOOKED BACK AT
THE INFURIATE ELEPHANT WITH HORROR.

OR, THE Circus Queen's Shadower

A Romance of the Sawdust Circle.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

[THE BOY WITH CIRCUS ON THE BRAIN.

"SAY, mister?"

"Well, say it quick."

"Can't I fetch water, or do somethin', to
get a free ticket?"

Harry Murray, superintendent of the
"Greatest One-Ring Show On Earth," ob-
served the little fellow well.

The applicant was a bright-eyed boy of
fourteen years, of muscular build, with dark

hair and tanned face, and his whole raiment consisted of hat, shirt and trowsers.

"What's your name?" the showman asked.

"My name's Jack Reed, but the boys all call me Jumpin'-Jack, fer a nickname, sir."

"Jumping-Jack?"

"Yes."

"Ha, ha, ha! Well, that is a nickname, true enough. Why do they call you that?"

"Because I'm a jumper."

"Let me see you jump, if that's the case."

The boy flung his hat to the ground, leaped up lightly, and to the astonishment of the showman and all who stood near, turned over backward with the greatest ease, as quick as a wink, and came down upon the same spot where he had been standing.

"Great Scott!" Harry Murray exclaimed. "Where did you learn to do that, boy?"

"Learnt it myself, sir."

"Can you do anything else?"

"I can jump over a string a foot higher than my head, with a run, sir; and I can tumble twice, if I get a good start."

The mischief you can! You are a circus in yourself. But, you must have seen somebody do these things to put you in the notion of it, didn't you?"

"Yes; there was a circus here two years ago, an' me an' some of the other boys took to playin' circus. I'm the only one that stuck to it, though, and now they say I have circus on the brain."

"Well, you have made a go of it, sure enough. Yes, take that pail and get some water and keep this gang of men supplied while they are at work, and I'll give you tickets for all the performances. And, say, I want to see you again before we go away."

"All right, sir."

The boy grinned from ear to ear, gave the wink to some of his chums who stood a little distance off, and grabbing up the pail was away like a shot to begin the work that was to bring the promised reward.

The showman turned sharply to some of the men who had been lagging at their work while he had been talking with the boy, his voice soon had them all on the jump again at their liveliest, and the big white tent grew and assumed shape with every passing minute.

This was a red-letter day in the annals of Warrenton.

For weeks this day had been eagerly looked forward to, especially on the part of the boys of the town.

Every foot of available space throughout the town, almost, had been made use of by the bill-stickers, and the gorgeous pictures had been viewed again and again with wonder and delight.

And this was the day—the day of all days to the small boy, and the circus was there, a reality!

It was bright and early in the morning.

The train had arrived before daylight, and when the town awoke the wagons were being removed from the railroad to the field where the tents were to be put up.

As ever, the boys of the town were on hand as quickly as possible, and "Jumping" Jack Reed was second to none, as may be imagined from the glimpse the reader has now had of him, and the words quoted.

Jumping-Jack made all the haste possible to the nearest place where water was to be had, and filling the pail, hurried back again.

Before reaching the big tent he had to pass another that was being put up.

Here he was stopped, by one of the showmen.

"What do you want?" the boy demanded.

"Water, of course, you monkey!"

"Well, you can't have any of this, sir."

"What? You mean to say you won't give us a drink?"

"I'm carrying water for the gang in the big tent, and there—"

"We don't care a picayune who you are carrying it for; you hand over that pail or I'll kick a lung out of you!"

The fellow was a dark-faced man of thirty, perhaps, and was evidently the boss of the gang at work upon this tent. As he spoke he stepped forward and reached for the pail.

"Keep off!" Jumping-Jack warned.

"Give me that pail, confound you, boy!"

With this he gave Jack a cuff on the side of his head.

Jack had been trying to escape him, but, of course, could not do so with the heavy pail in hand.

No sooner had he been struck, however, than he stooped slightly, gripping the pail with both hands, and in the same moment the whole contents was dashed in the man's face.

Harry Murray, coming from the big tent, was just in time to see the whole performance.

He ran speedily toward the scene.

With an oath, the drenched man picked up a tent-pin and aimed a blow at the boy which must have killed him if he had been struck.

Jumping-Jack ducked his head with the quickness of lightning, and before another blow could be aimed he had leaped in the air and the heels of both feet were planted squarely upon the man's breast with force.

Down went the man, with a shock that almost rendered him insensible for the moment.

"That was a close call for you, boy," said Murray, who reached the spot at that moment. "I thought sure he would kill you, for he is an ugly devil."

Jumping-Jack noticed that the superintendent had a pistol in hand.

"He wasn't quick enough, that was all," Jack responded as coolly as if nothing had happened. "I'll have to go and fill 'er up again," taking the pail and starting off immediately.

Harry Murray looked at him a moment, then turned to the man on the ground and ordered him to get up.

"You are making trouble again, are you, Tom Hunter?" he demanded. "If you had killed that boy I would have shot you down in your tracks like a dog! Don't you dare to lay a finger on him!"

"Well, he needn't been so 'fraid of his water, need he? An' what business had he to drown me like this?"

"You should not have struck him. I saw it all. He knew what he was about."

"Well, you tell him to keep clear o' Tom Hunter."

The last was said in a muttered tone, and did not clearly reach the ears of the superintendent, as the fellow turned to his work.

Most of Jumping-Jack's chums had witnessed the set to, and they could not conceal the admiration they had for their hero. This was the first time they had ever seen Jack fight just that way.

Murray remained within sight until Jack returned with the second pail of water, and had passed safely into the big tent, and even then, before going elsewhere, he told some of the men to have an eye upon Hunter to see that he did the boy no harm.

The showman had taken a liking to Jumping-Jack.

In a few hours the tents were all up and the minor details were being pushed rapidly to completion.

The band chariot and other vehicles were forming in line for the great street parade, and now there were great crowds of sight-seers standing around and taking in everything.

Among these was one John Witman, a well-known character around town.

He was a drunkard, a veritable sot, who,

in his younger days, had had some connection or other with a circus himself.

He was now sober, or as sober as he was ever likely to be found in this world, and had been talking with the workmen here and there around, about old times, trying to "work" a pass.

Jumping-Jack had finished his work and was standing near him.

They were looking at the band-wagon and other attractions, and while they were thus engaged Tom Hunter came along.

Jumping Jack had been taking care to keep out of his way, and so drew back a little and put himself on the other side of Witman, where a tree concealed him partly from view.

The drunkard, on the strength of having been in the profession himself, had made his way further to the front than others cared to intrude, and when Hunter came along and stopped near him, Witman engaged him immediately in conversation in which Jumping-Jack was destined to hear something important.

CHAPTER II.

A STORY THAT SUGGESTED A SCHEME.

"I'm blamed if you don't git up a good turn-out, neighbor," Old Wit paid compliment.

That was the nickname by which the bum was familiarly known—"Old Wit."

"Yes, it will do," growled Hunter.

"It minds me a good deal of what Cook 'n' Tucker's was, fifteen or twenty years ago, an' I tell you that was a hummer!"

"I've heard said that it was a good show," Hunter merely rejoined.

The old bummer prattled on, in his crack-voiced way, saying a good deal in praise of the old show, but "allowing" that this one was just a little better; and meantime the parade was forming.

Presently the superintendent of the show came running with a little child in his arms, a child not more than five or six years old, as pretty as a flower and clad in the neatest and at the same time the most striking costume that can be imagined, for such a tot.

Murray passed with her close to where Old Wit and Hunter were standing.

At sight of the child the bummer's face turned ashy white, he gave a gasp and a start, involuntarily taking a step forward toward her.

Hunter noticed him.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded.

"That—that kid!" the bummer ejaculated.

"Who—who is she, neighbor?"

"You look as if you had seen a ghost, old man. That's Sam Bruce's brat, curse him! She's on the bills as 'Baby Bess.'"

"Dast me if her face didn't give me a shock."

"It gave you more than a shock, I should think, the way you looked and acted. Reminded you of somebody?"

"That's what it did."

"Who?"

"That's quite a story, neighbor. But, say, how comes you ain't in the parade yerself?"

"I've got the bounce, that's the reason."

"Whew! ye don't say?"

"Fact."

"What fer?"

"Well, like your case, it's quite a story. Had some trouble with a boy here early this mornin', an' as Murray had it in for me anyhow he used that as a 'scuse and let me go."

"Who was the boy?"

"They call him Jumpin'-Jack, I believe."

"I know him; smartest chap in this hull town if I do say, hang him!"

"You have no love for him?"

"Well, not much; but that ain't to say he ain't smart. He's a boy that's got circus on the brain."

"He'll never make a performer, though, if I get a fair chance at him before I leave this town. I'll break his back for him, for what he did to me. What is your grudge?"

"Oh, well, that don't matter; you kin do what ye please to him, fer all o' me, neighbor."

"Say, I want to talk with you soon's the parade starts."

"All right, neighbor."

It was true that Old Wit had no love for Jumping-Jack.

About a year before the time of our story there had been some stealing done in and around Warrenton.

A young man was accused of the evil-doing, and might have been arrested for it had it not been for Jumping-Jack, who cleared him by putting the crime upon Old Wit, where it belonged.

The bumper got off with a light sentence, as only one crime could be proved against him, but that put an end to the stealing.

Hence, his reason for the dislike he had for Jack.

The parade now started off, in all its array of gold and glitter, and the band struck up a popular air.

It came as nearly up to the bills as such parades generally do—maybe a little nearer, and the waiting crowds broke into a cheer when the music struck up, and the boys ran after the wagons.

There was one exception—Jumping-Jack.

He had heard enough of the conversation between Old Wit and Hunter to make him eager to hear more.

As the wagons passed, there was one little chariot in which rode Baby Bess, who was billed also as the "Rose of the Ring," and Old Wit looked at her again keenly as she rode by.

"Dast me if I couldn't swear it's the same kid," he said aloud.

Upon a flat, open platform, just ahead of the tiny chariot, rode a clown of the usual type.

He looked in the direction of Old Wit and Hunter, and kept his eyes upon them until they were left behind, when he gave his attention to the "funny business" of the hour.

"That's the kid's dad," said Hunter, calling attention to him. "He is more'n half afraid of me, 'fraid I'll do harm to the brat if I get the chance; and, between you and me, old fellow, there is some foundation for his fears. My time has about come, I tell you."

"What have you got against him?"

"Enough, be sure of that. See this handsome woman coming now?"

He indicated a beautiful young woman mounted upon a splendid horse and attired in a charming habit.

"Yes, I see her," said Old Wit.

"Well, she's Mlle. Lucie, the mother of the brat. Ha! she sees me, too. See where she's got her hand? Well, she's got a pistol in her fist; the way I know, she pulled it on me once."

"Whew!"

"I'm giving it to you straight. I was Sam Bruce's rival for her hand, about seven years ago, but I didn't stand no show, as she was struck on Sam. I swore that I would git even, though, and I haven't forgotten it. I joined the same show a-purpose this year."

"Hang me if it don't sound like t'other case, neighbor. Here, let's set down on this box fer a chat."

There was a box just behind them, at the foot of the tree.

They sat down, and Jumping-Jack, leaning against the tree on the other side, could not have had a better chance to listen.

Now the crowd was gone, and the remaining workmen, all of whom were busy, or nearly all, were in front of the two men as they sat down on the box. They had a most favorable opportunity for a chat.

"What do you mean by the other case, old fellow?" Hunter asked.

"It was a case in which I figgered myself about the same as you seem to figger in this one."

"Tell me about it."

"I don't mind, seein' as you have shown your hand to me."

"You needn't have any fear, if it's anything to be afraid of; maybe we can work together."

"Oh, no; the thing I speak about was done years ago, and has almost died out of mind and memory. Still, mebby I could be handy to you, for a consideration. What say?"

"We'll see. Go on with your story."

"It ain't to be supposed that you ever heard tell of Albert Cooper, a farmer that lives just a few miles out of this town, who had a child stole away from him about seventeen years ago; no, of course not. Well, this kid you call Baby Bess is the life pictur' of that child."

Jumping Jack's ears were wide open now, if ever in his life.

Every man, woman and child in Warrenton had heard the story of Lucy Cooper, for it was a matter that would probably never be forgotten.

"Never heard of it," said Hunter.

"No, not to be s'pced you had. It was a mystery for a long time—in fact it's a mystery still, and allus will be one, I reckon. The recollection of it will never die out, here at Warrenton, it ain't likely; and, there has allus been a sneakin' suspicion that I had somethin' to do with it; but, I hadn't. You see, Al. Cooper an' me was rivals fer the child's mother when she was a gal."

"Ha! the case is something like this one, sure enough."

"That's what I told ye. Ye see, Mary Reed was the finest gal in all this part of country, and she could have had her pick of the young bucks around—and she did, too. She picked Al. Cooper, though I made a hard fight myself, an' it was that disappointment that sent me to the dogs, I allus hold. Like you, I swore I'd git even some day, and by heavens I did—that is, it was just the same as if I had, when their child was missin' an' couldn't be found."

"The very thing!" exclaimed Hunter. "You have given me a plan, old fellow, and I'll pay you well to help me carry it out!"

CHAPTER III.

JUMPING-JACK DISCOVERED.

JUMPING-JACK could hardly contain himself.

He believed he was getting at the truth of that mystery of so long ago, something that had taken place before he was born.

John Witman had been suspected of having something to do with the disappearance of the little girl, but he had denied it, and nothing could be proved against him, and so he went clear.

Now, by his own words, it seemed plain that the suspicion had been right, although he still denied it.

Jumping-Jack certainly believed him guilty.

"So you are goin' to try the stealin' racket, too, are you, my fine fellow?" said Jack in thought. "I guess I'll have to take a hand in this game myself and see what will come of it. If you have got it in for me I'll have it in for you, too, and you sha'n't harm the Ring Rose if I can help it!"

"Then you think you'll steal her?" asked the bumper.

"That's what I'm going to do if life is spared me until this night. I'll be revenged the same as you—"

"Yes, but I haven't said that I stole the other one, mind ye."

"That's all right. Will you keep mum

and lend me a hand if I want help to carry out my plan?"

"Well, how much is there in it?"

"Five dollars."

"I'm yer turnip; you needn't look no furd'er."

"All right. I'll think of the plan, and will see you again before night."

"Good enough. But, say, you don't mean to kill the kid, nor nothin' like to that, do ye?"

"No, of course not."

"Can't help ye, if ye do, that's all. I'm a hard old nut, but I couldn't go to that length."

"You needn't have any squeamish feelings on that point, for I'll take the kid and bring her up in the profession. There'll be a fortune in her, once she has learned to ride well."

"An' you'll bring her out?"

"That's the plan; and, maybe marry her some day. Ha, ha, ha! that would not be a bad idea; since I couldn't have the mother, take the daughter. Ha, ha, ha!"

The fellow laughed aloud, and the old bumper looked around to see if any one was paying attention to what they were saying.

As he looked he espied Jumping-Jack behind the tree, and with an oath he got up.

"What are you doin' there?" he fiercely demanded.

At the first word Jack was upon his feet and at a safe distance, and as Hunter, too, sprung up, he glared at the boy in a way that boded ill for him if he could get hold of him.

"I was takin' a rest, after luggin' water all the mornin'," Jack answered.

"Yes, and you were listening, curse you!" cried the discharged circus man, in a rage, and he looked around as if to see who was watching.

"Well, a feller couldn't help hearin' what was said in his presence, could he, old hoss?" demanded Jumping-Jack, fearlessly. "I was here when you set your mills to runnin', and I hadn't no call to pull out."

"I'll pull you out, curse you!" grated Hunter, taking a step forward.

"And I'll knock you out, if you try it on," declared Jumping-Jack, picking up a stout stick that lay handy.

As he spoke he swung the stick in a threatening manner.

"Did you hear what we said?" demanded Hunter.

"Yes, every word of it. Don't see any need to lie about it. What's more, if you go to carry out what you intend doin', you will find that a feller 'bout my size is goin' to have a finger in the pie. As fer you, Old Wit, you had better take care how you run the risk of gettin' into trouble. I fixed you out once, and I can do it again, if I have to."

"You didn't hear nothin' to hurt me," declared the bumper. "Everybody knows that story I told, an' I said plain as how it wasn't my doin'."

"That's all right; but, you are this feller's turnip fer five dollars—that's what you said, and if there is any funny work goin' on here you will get a berth in the jug again."

The loud words had now attracted some of the laborers belonging to the circus, and one of these stepped toward Hunter.

"Here, what's the row?" he demanded.

"None of your business," the retort.

"I'm doing this."

"Well, I'll make it my business, anyhow, and you won't be doin' it—if you intend to hurt that boy."

"Let him come and git a taste of this if he wants to," cried Jumping-Jack, flourishing his stick. "I have tumbled him once and I can do it again. I ain't 'fraid of him."

"You get off out of here, anyhow, Tom Hunter," cried the showman. "You have got the bounce, and Murray said for us to see that you didn't do any mischief to this

lad. Off with ye, now, or you'll be sorry you didn't, that's all. Boy, you want to keep your eye open for that fellow."

"I've got my optic skinned for him, you bet," declared Jack.

"I'll fix you out, curse you," growled the angry Hunter. "And for you, Hank Bliss, I'll maybe square up with you, too, for you have been lookin' for my job a good while, and at last you have got it."

"Couldn't have got it if you had behaved yourself, and I didn't do nothing to get you out, that's sure."

"That's your say-so."

"Well, get on out of here, anyhow. And you, boy, take my advice and stay away from where he can get a crack at ye. He'll most likely lay you out, if you give him half a show."

The man made a step toward Hunter as he spoke, and Hunter and Old Wit moved muttering away.

"I'll fix you, curse you!" Hunter hissed again, scowling at Jack.

"Look out you don't git fixed," Jack retorted.

"What's this all about, boy?" asked the man called Hank Bliss, who, as we have learned, had been put in Hunter's place.

"It means that feller is up to mischief, that's what it means," answered Jack promptly. "Where is the boss of this concern? He wanted to see me, and I guess this is as good a time as any."

"You mean Murray?"

"I guess that was his name."

"He's in the menagerie tent," with a jerk of his thumb.

"Well, just show me the way in and let me whisper at him for a minute, if you please."

"Come right around this way and go in."

He indicated the direction, and Jumping-Jack was soon under the canvas.

Some work was going on in this tent, to make it ready for the reception of the animal wagons on their return from the parade.

Owing to the noise of the workmen, and the distance of the tent from where Jumping-Jack had had the trouble with Hunter, the superintendent of the circus had heard nothing of it.

"Hello, Jumping-Jack!" he greeted his friend. "I suppose you have finished your work and want your pass, eh?"

"Yes, the work is done, but that ain't what's brought me here," Jack made reply.

"What then?"

"To put you onto somethin' that I've got hold of. That man Hunter, that got knocked over this mornin', is up to mischief."

"Ha! I am not greatly surprised. What is it?"

"He means to steal Baby Bess, the Ring Rose, if he gets a chance, and means to do it to-night."

"The deuce! I'll have to take care of him, I see. Where is he?"

"He's gone off now, sir."

"Well, he had better not come fooling around here, if he wants to keep his skin whole, I can tell him that. But, we'll look out for Baby Bess, same as we have been right along."

"That's what you want to do, sir, for he means it, this time, sure enough. I heard the whole talk."

"There's two of them, then?"

"Yes; he has picked up a bum that belongs here, but he ain't no good."

"Well, my boy, here's your pass. Much obliged to you for putting me on watch of him. Look out for him yourself."

"I'll do that, you bet. Thank 'e, sir."

"And don't forget that I want to see you before we go away from here. I'm too busy to talk to you now. Be on hand to take in the performances, and I'll promise you some good tumbling."

CHAPTER IV.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

IN the mean while Old Wit and his scheming friend had disappeared.

They had left the show-ground and made their way in the direction of a groggery that Old Wit regularly patronized.

"You have got to look out now, boy," said the bummer, as they went along. "I have told ye what kind of a chap that youngster is, and he'll wind us up 'fore we know it if we don't watch out."

"Let him try it, that's all."

"But he'll do it, sure's you live. I'll bet he has told the boss all he heard us sayin'."

"Yes, I expect he has done that, but we can get around that point—or at any rate I think I can do it. I'll shave off this whisker and not a man of them will know me."

"Ha! never thought of that."

"And the boy himself won't get onto me, don't you see?"

"I don't know about that part of it. Ye see, I know Jumpin'-Jack and you don't, that's the difference."

"To hear you talk a feller might think he was a detective. He might be able to get over a man like you, but he don't want to monkey around me, that I'll tell him. But, I'll fix him."

"What'll you do?"

"Lay him on the shelf for a time."

"You don't mean to kill him?"

"Oh, no; at any rate we won't say so. I'll put him to sleep, to keep him out of the way till the show is gone."

"Well, I sha'n't object, for I have got it in for him, too. But, he is a good deal too smart for me, for I ain't as steady on the pins as I used ter be, an' he kin jump all around me."

"I'll cut short his jumping days, hang him!"

Hunter had still a painful recollection of one of Jack's jumping feats, and to be reminded of it served to anger him the more.

A few of their remarks, these, and by this time they were at their destination, where they entered and where Hunter cemented his compact with Old Wit in a social glass.

They sat down to talk further.

"Yes, that's what I'll do," Hunter said.

"I'll drop this beard, and I won't be known. We'll part company till night, unless I want to use you sooner, in which case I'll hunt you up on the quiet. The first move of all is to get that boy out of the way."

"You can't do nothin' if you don't."

"I don't give him credit for all the smartness you seem to think he has; it is mainly a matter of revenge with me."

"All right. What then?"

"Then for a chance at the gal. She will be guarded, but they won't know me after I shave, and before they know it I'll have her and make off. Then I'll want your aid."

"And I'll stick to my bargain, you kin rely on't."

"Well, here, take another snifter, and I'll be off. If you see any one askin' for me, tell 'em that the last you seen of me I was goin' out of town countin' the railroad ties as I went."

"All right."

They took a parting dose of poison together, and Hunter went out. Half an hour later it would have puzzled Old Wit to recognize him.

All the minor streets of the town were deserted, everybody being out upon the main thoroughfares to see the parade, and the rascally Hunter had not been observed by any one on leaving the barber's.

He made his way straight back to the show grounds.

Passing near enough to some men who knew him well for them to have a chance to recognize him, he thus tested his disguise—to call it that.

They did not know him, though one or two looked sharply at him.

And, presently, he fell in with Jumping-Jack.

If he had calculated upon fooling the boy, he was mistaken, for with one penetrating glance at him, Jack cried out:

"It won't work, old man. You can't get close enough to me that way, to run me down, and you don't want to try it on, for if you do you'll get into a peck of trouble, sure as you live."

"What do you mean?" demanded Hunter, changing his voice. "What are you talkin' about?"

He had stopped, and tried to look the innocent.

"Mean just what I say," rejoined Jack. "You keep your distance, or I'll upset your apple-cart for you again."

Hunter now smiled, still persisting, hoping to make the boy doubt.

"I guess you must be mistaken in the man," he said. "Nobody has upset my apple-cart, as you call it, and I think it would take something bigger than you to do it, my lad."

Very pleasantly he said it.

"No use, old sport," said Jumping-Jack. "I know you; and you know I know you. May jest as well shy off, now, for if you monkey with me I'll jump up and come down on your pate in a way that will make your head swim. I'll tell the boss about your whiskers, too."

The fellow went on, and Jack looked around to see if he could sight Murray. He knew he had come out of the tent.

He saw him a little distance off, talking with another man.

Jack moved toward them.

"You say he is employed in this company?" he heard the stranger ask.

"Yes; he is our best clown," answered Murray.

The stranger was a well-dressed man, evidently an Englishman—a distinction which Jumping-Jack could not draw, of course.

"And his name is Bruce, you say? Samuel Bruce?"

"That is his name, sir."

"He must be the man. Where can I find him? Is he somewhere around in the canvas?"

"No; he is just now out with the parade. I will point him out to you when the wagons come in, if you care to wait around. It won't be a great while, now."

"All right, I'll wait. In fact, it is highly important. I bring Mr. Bruce good news from the other side: the truth of the matter is, sir, he has just fallen into a fine estate, on the death of an elder brother."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. He'll have to stay with us to the end of the season just the same, however."

Murray now sighted Jack.

"What's wanted, my boy?" he asked, seeming to read in Jack's face that something had happened.

"I just want to put you onto that fellow again," said Jack. "He has gone and had his whiskers shaved off, and he's around here again. But, he didn't fool me worth a cent."

"I'll fool him, though," cried Murray. "I'll see if there is any law in this town, if he don't keep away from here."

Jack was looking at the stranger casually.

There was something about the man he did not particularly fancy, but it might not be anything against his credit for all that.

Still, as he asked for Bruce, and as Jack was already interested in the clown, knowing him to be the father of the Rose of the Ring, the boy made up his mind to learn more if he could.

The gentlemen walked leisurely away, and was joined presently by another man, a rather sullen-faced fellow.

They sat down on the very box where

Old Wit and Hunter had held their talk a little while before, and Jack lost no time in placing himself behind the tree unseen and unheard.

"Yes, he's the one, no doubt of it," he heard the first-mentioned saying. "I will publicly make known to him his good fortune, and give him the papers, and after that there can never be any doubt as to his identity, you see. We are near the end of our work now."

"That will end your part of it, when you have done that."

"Yes, and then comes yours."

"And I'll do mine up in haste, just as soon as chance offers so that it will have the appearance of an accident."

"And that done— But, what's the matter with that fellow?"

A man was motioning to them, making signs they could not readily understand, and the first-mentioned called out:

"What is it, fellow?"

"Well, if I must holler, look behind that tree!"

The informant was Tom Hunter, and he pointed to where Jumping-Jack was hiding, and there the boy with circus on the brain was discovered in the act of listening.

CHAPTER V.

A CLOWN IN GOOD LUCK.

JUMPING-JACK was out of reach in the same moment.

"See here, boy, what were you doing there? Were you listening to our private conversation?"

"Of course he was," declared Tom Hunter. "He is an infernal young spy and tattletale, that's what he is, and all he is. Take care what you say in his hearing, is my advice."

"And if you want to keep out of the company of a rascal," cried Jumping-Jack, "just shun that fellow same as you would a case of yaller fever or worse. He is rank p'izen clear through and through, and he knows that I know it. What have you got to say to that, Hunter?"

"You'll know before I am done with you."

"And you had better be done with me before you begin. As to my character and general bill o' health, gentlemen, I'd respectfully refer you to Mr. Murray, the gentleman you talked with a minute ago."

"And he knows nothing about the little cuss," declared Hunter. "He has shown what he is by listening. I have got it in for him, and I'm going to give him the best drubbing he ever had in his life before I leave this town. Don't you forget that, you young rascal!"

"Well, he heard nothing from us that amounts to anything, even if he was listening," remarked the elder of the two men. "We have nothing to conceal; therefore his listening does no harm."

"That's nothin' to me," said Hunter. "I seen him there, and thought you'd ought to know it."

"Certainly, sir, and greatly obliged to you; but, it made no difference, and if the young gentleman desires to hear more he may sit down here between us. What do you say, my little man?"

With a grin upon his face, Hunter walked away, inasmuch as he saw Murray approaching, and did not wait to hear Jack's response.

"Wouldn't mind hearin' more of it, if it was goin' on in the same way," said Jumping-Jack, "but I guess you'd change the subject if I took up your offer. Don't you forget that I've heard somethin'."

"Why, what do you mean, you jackanapes?"

"I mean what I say. I have stored away what I heard, and I'll remember it, too."

"If you'll excuse me, Mr. Taggard," said

the sullen-faced man, "I'll be going now, as I have a matter of business to attend to."

The men looked at each other.

Something like a signal was exchanged, with eyes, and they understood.

"Certainly, Mr. Mulvern," the elder responded. "I'll see you again later, after I have finished my business here with Mr. Bruce."

They took polite leave of each other, with a wave of the hand, and the man called Mulvern went off in the direction Tom Hunter had taken, walking leisurely and swinging his cane.

Jumping-Jack looked after him with suspicion.

"Mebby I'm wrong," he thought, "but I've got the idee that he is goin' for a talk with Hunter. Shouldn't wonder if a feller about my size an' shape got into trouble yet."

Meantime Murray had come up.

"Was that Hunter?" he inquired of Jack.

"Yes, the first feller, sir," Jumping-Jack made reply.

"I thought so, and I was going to run him out of here in a hurry if he hadn't started."

"Guess he seen ye comin', sir."

"No doubt."

"You know this boy then?" asked Mr. Taggard.

"Why, certainly," answered Murray.

"Just picked him up here this morning."

"Ah! then he is a stranger to you, really. He was caught listening behind this tree a minute ago."

"Listening?" and Murray looked at Jack.

"Yes, listening. I was talking here with my man Mulvern, when a man called our attention to him."

"That was Hunter," spoke up Jack.

"If that's the case, don't go a cent on that fellow," advised Murray. "This boy is all right, and I'll vouch for him. Is it true that you were listening, Jack?"

"Fact," Jumping-Jack admitted.

"Well, you're honest about it, anyhow. What were you listening for?"

"To hear what was said, that's all. I'm a friend to Sam Bruce, even if I don't know him yet, and I wanted to learn somethin' about what these men have to do with him."

"Oh! if that is the case, it is all right," cried Mr. Taggard, laughing, and he held out his hand to Jack. "Give me your hand, my little man, for I, too, am the friend of Mr. Bruce. I have come all the way from London to do him a service. There is no more to be said."

Jack gave his hand, and the man shook it heartily.

"I'll take your word for it," Jack said, simply.

The man looked at him sharply, and Jack thought he saw something of a threatening expression in his eyes.

Murray, too, looked at the boy, as if wondering what he meant by his words, as well as by the manner in which they were spoken.

"I think you can safely trust this boy, Mr. Taggard," Murray said. "I have found him quick, straight and reliable, so far. But, look out for that fellow Hunter, who spoke evil of him."

"Had he reason to speak ill of the boy?"

"Yes, from his point of view. The boy knocked him down this morning for interfering with him, and served the fellow right."

"Knocked him down—this boy knocked the man down?"

"Yes, as neatly as you ever saw."

"The deuce!"

"You will find him able to take care of himself, even if he is small. And, I will say further that he is on the side of right in his dispute with Hunter. You may safely trust the boy, sir."

"No doubt of it, if you say so. But, is this the parade?"

"Yes, here it is."

The parade had made its round, and had reached the starting point.

When it came into the grounds the clown riding on the platform car leaped lightly to the ground and took Baby Bess from her chariot.

Nor did he have to lift her out, either, for, clapping her hands gleefully the child sprung to his arms as he put them up to receive her, and he held her on his left arm.

He looked along the line to see his wife.

She was coming, and slipped out of the saddle when she reached the spot, an attendant taking her horse.

"Mr. Bruce, see here."

The clown turned instantly, and "Mlle. Lucie," too, looked in the same direction.

It was Harry Murray who had spoken.

"This gentleman has come to find you, and has some good news for you, so he tells me."

Murray then introduced Mr. Taggard.

"Yes, I bring you news, sir," that gentleman proceeded to explain, as soon as the civilities had been exchanged. "Your elder brother, Richard, is dead, and in consequence you, as the next of kin, come into the estate of your father. Your younger brother, Charles, sent me personally to find you, and in the interim he is taking care of the property for you."

The expression of the clown's face could not be determined, owing to the fact that his face was bedaubed with paint.

His manner, however, was sad.

"This is bad news rather than good, sir," he said. "I had not heard of Dick's death, and I'm sorry. I am well enough off as I am, and care nothing for the estate in England."

"Hoity-toity!" exclaimed the attorney, for such he evidently was. "You would not be human, were you meaning what you say. Here is a big fortune, all yours, and you have only to come and claim it. Allow me, sir, to put the papers into your hands in the presence of these witnesses."

"But, what proof have you that I am Samuel Bruce?" asked the clown.

"All that is necessary, sir. The fact that I have followed you step by step, and the further fact that you acknowledge your identity."

"Well, I accept the papers, of course, since it is my right, but I cannot attend to the matter now. I will write to Charles as soon as possible and tell him to make use of the place the same as if it had fallen to him, until I can join him."

The attorney bowed, and with a neat little speech took his leave.

CHAPTER VI.

JACK MAKES FRIENDS.

SAM BRUCE was a general favorite with the circus company.

As the attorney took leave, after his little speech, those who had heard it gave a cheer for Sam.

"Thanks, friends," the clown responded. "You'll find that this bit of good fortune hasn't turned my head, and that I'll be the same Sam. Don't believe I'll sing a bit louder this afternoon."

They laughed, and the clown, with his wife and their little child, turned to go to their dressing tent.

"Another word with you, Sam," spoke up Murray. "But, I'll walk that way with you. Come along, Jumping-Jack, for I want to introduce you to this lady and gentleman. My *protege*, Sam."

"I'm with ye," responded Jack, and he leaped lightly and turned over with as much ease as the best man connected with the show could have done. "I'm your Jumpin'-Jack, every time, you bet!"

And he turned three or four times in quick succession, to show what he could do.

"Where the deuce did you find it, Murray?" asked Sam.

"Isn't he a daisy?"

"He's a jumper, no getting around that; or, I should say a tumbler. He's a card, no mistake."

"I'm going to see what he can do this afternoon. They call him the boy with circus on the brain. He saw a show about two years ago, and this is the result of his practice since."

"He's got circus in his bones, too, then."

We need not say that this talk tickled Jack, he was only a boy, and was still susceptible to praise.

Jack knew, however, that every word of this praise was meant; he could distinguish between honest praise and unmeaning flattery, young as he was. Then, too, he had an object.

He wanted to join a circus, and this was the circus he wanted to join. He saw his opportunity, and meant to make the most of it, if a sample now and then of his jumping ability would win for him any consideration; and, by the appearance of things, it would.

"But, Sam, I have a word of caution for you, that is what I wanted to see you about," said Murray.

"What is it?"

"Look well to Baby Bess to day and to night."

"Why, what is the matter?" asked the child's mother, in a tone of alarm.

"Well, I had to get rid of Tom Hunter this morning, and he has made threats against you—or, that is, has really planned to steal the child, if he can."

"The monster! But, let him try it on, that's all."

The woman tapped her pocket.

"Yes, let him try it and see what will happen," grated the clown. "I'm glad you told me, Mr. Murray."

"You can thank this boy," Murray declared. "He is something of a detective as well as a jumper, and he found out about the scheme, and put me onto it. But, take mighty good care of Baby Bess."

"No need to tell us to do that, Mr. Murray."

"I suppose not, and yet there is great need, too. The fellow is thoroughly aroused, and means mischief."

"Well, let him take care."

"And, too, you may not recognize him, for he has shaved off his beard."

"We'll both know him," said "Mlle. Lucie," "for he had no beard at the time when we knew him and had trouble with him."

"All right; but, be watchful."

As that was all Murray had to say, he dropped behind, but Jumping Jack continued on with the little family.

"And I have got something more to say to you, too, Mr. Bruce," Jack declared in his frank and open manner.

"And what's that, my fine jumper?"

"You want to keep your eyes peeled for that sleek feller what gave you the papers and said you'd got a fortune."

"Why so?"

"Cause, I have the idee that he don't mean ye fair, that's all. He's got a chum with him, an' I heard 'em talkin' somethin' that wasn't as goody-goody as it might 'a' been."

"That so? What did they have to say?"

Jumping Jack told what he had heard, to which the clown listened with interest.

"There may be something in it," he said.

"I don't know what it can mean, exactly, but that kind of talk seems to have some significance."

"Have you joined this show, boy?" asked the mother of Baby Bess.

"No, but I'd like to," declared Jumping Jack, eagerly. "Tell you what I'll do; I'll try to keep my eye open for that skunk, so's he don't get the chance to steal your little

girl, and you speak a good word for me to the boss."

"Done!" said Bruce, promptly. "That was just what I was going to propose to you. We have a man to watch her, when we both have to be in the ring at once, but it won't do any harm to have extra help on hand, under the circumstances. I'll speak to Mr. Murray about it."

"Yes, but I have got to see the tumblin' or bu'st. Didn't think about that when I spoke. But, we can fix that somehow."

"Well, we'll see about it later."

Jumping Jack took leave of their tent and sauntered around to see what was to be seen, and all he had to do, when questioned, was to show his pass.

Murray had given him not only a ticket, but a general pass to the whole concern, good anywhere at any time, proof of the liking he had taken to the boy. And, the sturdy little fellow was bound to see it all.

"I told you something was going to happen to-day," spoke "Mlle. Lucie," as soon as Jack had gone.

"Well, something has happened, Lucy," answered the clown. "I have dropped in to a fortune, it seems."

"I know; but, I mean something terrible. You know I mentioned it to you early this morning, and the feeling is still over me."

"Well, do not let it make you nervous, darling. We have had warning of something to look out for, now, thanks to that boy, and Hunter will have to be sharp to do us harm."

"Oh! what would we do if he should steal our pet?"

The mother caught her child to her arms and pressed her fondly, while tears sprung to her lovely hazel eyes.

"Who is goin' to steal me?" asked Baby Bess.

"Nobody," answered Sam Bruce, decisively. "You must stay close to papa and mamma, and Mr. Murray and Charlie."

"Oh, yes; me won't let any bad man steal me. Baby likes that boy, mamma, but he won't steal me, will he?"

"No, he would not steal you; he would bring you right back to mamma."

So they talked with the child while they laid off their show trappings, there in the privacy of their tent, and when finally they came forth they were found to be as handsome a couple as one would wish to see.

Meanwhile, what of the man Mulvern?

Following the way Hunter had gone, he overtook him soon after passing out of sight of the show grounds.

"A word with you, my man?" he requested.

"I don't care," answered Hunter, "if you want to."

"Yes, I want to ask you something more about that boy who was listening."

"I've told you all I know about him, except that he is as good as done for, if I get a chance at him."

"What's the row between you and him?"

"That don't matter."

"Well, I saw there was somethin', and I'd like to make you a fair offer if I may."

"What is it? I bet you are a Britisher, and you are a ugly-lookin' bulldog, if I do make bold to say it. Can't you do your own work?"

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I mean that I can see as far into a board as the next man."

"You'll have to explain clearer than that."

"Well, I mean that I know you are up to some deviltry, the way you looked when you found that boy had been listenin', and you would like to have his mouth closed up for awhile."

"You are a shrewd fellow, my man. I'd like to have a chat with you, if there is some

place where we may go. I take it things have gone wrong with you, and that you would like to get a lick back at somebody. Am I right?"

"I guess I'll let you show your hand first," returned Hunter, guardedly.

CHAPTER VII.

EXCITEMENT IN THE RING.

By one o'clock the streets of Wairenton were crowded.

The whole town was out, nearly, and people had come in from every direction, far and near.

Nothing will draw a crowd like a circus, and this particular circus seems to be particularly successful in that respect. It was doubtful whether its canvas could accommodate the people.

The children were legion, the lovers were many, and the older people, too, even to the aged grandsires, had come in to see the show.

The bills on fences and dead walls were gazed upon by gaping crowds.

All had one thought—the circus.

Among others were a middle-aged couple, man and wife, evidently well-to-do farming people, who walked arm in arm as fondly as lovers in the first blush of their amorousity.

They were a good-looking couple, too, whose faces seemed to show that their matrimonial life had been one of peace. Yet there was, withal, a certain sadness in the faces of both which seemed to speak of sorrow that had come into their lives during the years that had flown.

We find them standing and gazing upon some of the gorgeous posters, not by any means alone.

"I believe it will be a good show, Albert," spoke the woman.

"Haven't a doubt of it, Mary," was the answer.

"And it will be the first one we have seen in many a day. You know you was sick with rheumatiz when the last one was here, two years ago."

"Yes, and you was such a goose over me that you thought you couldn't come in to town to see it just 'cause I was sick and couldn't come. Fore that one, there hadn't been a show here in goodness knows when."

"I do believe Cook and Tucker's was the last, and that was the year that—"

"There, now, Mary, don't let's bring up the past if we can help it; not to-day, anyhow. I know how you'll feel, if you do."

"Well, it ain't no worse to say it than to think about it all the time, is it, Albert?"

"No, I suppose not, Mary; but, let's try not to think."

They pressed each other's hands and moved on to look at other pictures, as they slowly made their way to the grounds—for they were early.

On one very high fence that inclosed a new building that was being erected, was a particularly gorgeous display, and the couple naturally stopped to look at this one too.

At the top was the name of the wonderful show—

THE

AMERICA-ENGLAND

CONSOLIDATED HIPPODROMES.

THE GREATEST ONE RING SHOW ON EARTH.

And after the name followed all the etcetera, all the way down through the middle space of the fence.

On either hand were pictures, some more extensive than could be found on any other fence, and this was really as good as the show itself, to some of the rustics who gaped at it.

One of the pictures was that of Baby Bess, in her bareback act.

She was pictured upon a big gray horse, cleverly balancing on one foot and tossing kisses to the people around.

"Goodness! do they allow a child like that to ride?" gasped the woman, as her eyes took it in.

"I suppose they do, Mary, or it wouldn't be here," answered the husband. "I guess all the pictures ain't as true as might be, however. The child may have been six years old once."

"Six years old—is that what it says?"

"Yes; Baby Bess, the Rose of the Ring, only six years old; that is the way it reads."

"And that was just the age of—"

"Now, Mary, please don't keep remindin' yourself all the time. Come on, maybe we'll find it open now."

They moved on in the direction of the show-grounds, and ere long were lost in the great throng that was rapidly gathering before the entrance to the big tent, awaiting for admittance.

When the time for the performance came, the great tent was packed.

It was a sight to gladden the showmen's eyes, for it seemed almost impossible for them to seat any more people.

There was a buzz of expectancy going on, while the crowd waited for the band to strike up and the grand entrance to burst upon their sight, and rustic lovers munched peanuts to their soul's content.

Finally, the band brayed out, and the time was at hand.

Came then the grand entree, thrilling the audience with delight, and act followed act in rapid succession.

The show was a good one, as circuses go, and particularly good was the leading clown, Sam Bruce—he went by his true name on the bills and in the ring.

Mlle. Lucie, who, in the ring, looked to be not more than eighteen years of age, made a hit, and was a general favorite. Her riding was certainly something above the average.

Finally was announced—"Baby Bess, the Rose of the Ring."

The band dropped to lower and slower music than had been played while the mother of the child was riding, and in from the rear came a big gray horse upon the back of which sat the child.

It was a pretty sight.

More handsome than any rose was the child, and her soft hair rose and fell with every movement the horse made.

The animal did not carry a pad, but had a square of gold cloth strapped tightly to place, and on this the child sat, in perfect compose, while the horse made the circle of the ring.

Murray was ringmaster, and Sam Bruce was on hand, needless to say.

The horse had made only half the circle when suddenly there was a woman's scream, loud and piercing.

It came from the right side of the tent, and every eye was turned in that direction, where, from one of the lower seats, a woman was seen making her way down toward the ring.

"My child!" she cried. "My child, my long-lost child!"

There was a man with her, who was trying to detain her, while his own face was pale as death.

"No, no; I know better!" the woman cried out. "I know it is my child, my darling! Could there be another like her in the world? No, no!"

There was great excitement, and as the big gray showed some of it the clown ran to his head and stopped him, patting him and rubbing his neck, while he essayed a joke with the ringmaster.

The woman had broken away from the man who tried to detain her, and was now running to the ring.

She was recognized, and her name was on many lips.

"Mary Cooper!"

"She thinks it's her Lucy!"

"And it is enough like the child, too!"

"The sight has turned her mind, the poor thing!"

These and a hundred more such, all in a brief space of time.

Murray met the woman at the edge of the ring, and gently held her back.

Albert Cooper was at her side immediately, pale as death, and tried to draw her away.

"Is she crazy, sir?" asked Murray.

"No; she thinks that child is one that was stolen from us seventeen years ago; and, it looks enough like her, Lord knows."

"Seventeen years!" gasped the poor woman, passing her hand across her forehead. "Seventeen years! and it seemed only yesterday, when that sweet vision burst on my sight."

"This child is only six years old, lady," spoke Murray, "so you see how impossible it is."

"Yes, yes, just the age of our Lucy, sir."

"Well, return to your places, and let the performance go on before there is excitement—"

"No, no; I must have one look at the child—one close look, sir. Do not deny me that. I am not crazy, though God alone knows how near I have been to it at times in my sorrow."

"Sam, this way," the ringmaster ordered.

"Let the lady see the Rose of the Ring."

The clown obeyed, coming around the ring with long, ludicrous strides that made the people laugh, singing—"Ring around a rosy, pocket full o' posy," etc.; and the child was brought near the bereaved woman.

CHAPTER VIII.

PROMPTED BY THE DEVIL.

Those present who knew Mrs. Cooper, and they were many, felt keenly for her.

There were many who remembered her little girl well, and these recognized the striking likeness this child bore to her.

What we have described took place all in a short space of time, and there were many present who looked upon it as a part of the regular performance and wondered what was coming.

In a few moments the clown had reached the spot where the woman was standing on the bank surrounding the ring.

The woman laid her hand on the child, looking earnestly into her face.

Only a moment, then she caught her into her arms.

"My Lucy! my Lucy!" she cried.

"There, there, lady!" said the clown, decisively; "this will never do. The performance must go on. If you'll stay after the performance you shall see the child again."

Baby Bess was badly scared, and was ready to cry.

Sam took her from the woman's hold and replaced her upon the horse, while he was speaking.

"You will let me see her again?" the woman asked.

"Yes, I promise you that."

"But, who is she? Who are her parents?"

"I am the father of the child, lady."

"And she is so much like my Lucy, so much like her! Yes, Albert, I'll go back now."

The clown was leading the horse around the ring again, and the farmer conducted his trembling wife back to the seats they had occupied.

"Hello, Mister Murray!" the clown sung out, stopping the horse.

"Well, sir," with a crack of the whip, "what is it?"

"Baby Bess has got to have more pay."

"More pay?"

"Yes, sir."

"And why has Baby Bess got to have more pay?"

"Because she's getting so sweet that the ladies take her for a rose in fact, and want to pluck her."

"She's only a bud, yet, Sam; we'll see what she'll be when she blooms out in full, and then we'll see about increasing her pay. But, sir, why are you rubbing your leg that way?"

The clown was rubbing his leg vigorously all the time.

"Didn't you hit me?"

"Of course I didn't hit you, sir."

"Oh! I thought you did, and I was rubbin' where I thought it was goin' to hurt."

"You are a fool, sir!"

The ringmaster gave his whip a sharp crack, the clown gave a yell and turned over backward, the horse broke into its slow canter, and the performance went on.

Farmer Cooper and his wife watched the little child go through her performance, both very pale, and when finally she left the ring, throwing kisses right and left, both drew a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad that's over," spoke the good woman.

"And so am I," said her husband. "Don't you think we'd better go out and go home?"

"No, no; I couldn't, not till I've seen that child once more. I want to see her close till I have a good long look. I could never rest easy if I didn't, Albert."

"All right, I won't oppose ye, Mary."

In the mean time something else had been going on, in a quiet manner.

Tom Hunter, having had his talk with the man Mulvern, had come back again to the circus-grounds.

He was now in a measure in disguise, but moved with caution in order not to be recognized, in case he happened to come face to face with any one whom he could not deceive.

"I'll fix him," he said to himself, as he caught a glimpse of Jumping-Jack. "Once let me get into the properties tent unseen, and I'll have a disguise that no one will penetrate."

When he came where he could act boldly, he set to work as one of the common laboring-hands.

Taking up some hay, he entered one of the tents.

Here was an elephant, among other animals, and he put the hay in to it, which was all right to do at about that hour.

But, he did not stop at that. He noticed that the beast was in an ugly mood, into which it had a way of getting sometimes, and as if another thought came to him on the spur of the moment, he teased it.

This was while Mlle. Lucie was in the ring doing her act, which the fellow, well acquainted as he was with the routine of the performance, was well aware of; and the sinister smile upon his face, what could be seen of it for the dirt he had put on, was suspicious.

To come from the ring, the queen of the arena had to pass this elephant at rather close range.

Continuing to tease the brute, from a place where he could not be seen, the villain soon had it in a towering passion.

The elephant was an ugly one, and when thoroughly aroused was dangerous, and Tom Hunter seemed to know just how far to go in order to put it in the mood he desired for his purpose.

Presently a change of the music told that the act in the ring was ended, and that the rider was coming out.

Hunter gave the elephant a final prod that thoroughly aroused it.

Out dashed the queen of the arena, just as the elephant tossed its trunk and gave voice to a roar, and the distance was so short that the rider could not stop.

The elephant struck at her as she passed, barely missing, and the horse became for the instant terrorized and stopped with a snort right where the elephant had opportunity to repeat the blow.

"On, Beauty!" cried the arena queen, while she looked back at the infuriate elephant with horror.

The brute had its trunk raised, and was flourishing it like a man about to strike a blow with a club, and Hunter applied the torment again.

Down came the weapon with which nature had provided the monster, and only for the fact that in the same instant the horse gave a leap forward, both rider and horse might have been killed.

As it was, they barely escaped.

Hunter was out from his hiding-place and away in a moment, and the cry of the woman brought employees to the spot immediately.

There was excitement for a few minutes, but there was no time to spare just then, and another performer was on in a moment, while the employees took charge of the enraged beast.

"Curse the luck!" muttered Hunter. "It would have done me good, if the old fellow had hit the woman and killed her on the spot. But, I have it in for them, and they have not felt the weight of my hand yet. Wait till to-night! I'll fix them both if I can!"

In another minute he was at work at something, and no one took particular notice of him.

Gradually he made his way around to a certain tent.

Here he made himself busy.

Several tumblers were there, making ready to appear, and presently they came forth running, and the discharged employee slipped in.

No one was there, but others would be in as soon as the act ended which was now being performed, and whatever his errand was the fellow had to work lively; and he did, too.

He was well acquainted with the place.

Going to a certain chest, he opened it, and taking out some articles, quickly selected, he thrust them into his pockets.

Picking up two buckets, then, he was just going out with them when another man came in, but Hunter's presence was not questioned, as he was taken to be one of the regular drudges of the company.

Needless to say, though, no water was brought, and the buckets were found later on around on the other side of the tent.

Hunter left the grounds and made his way to some stables in the rear of a third-rate tavern.

Here he found the man Mulvern.

"Well, what luck?" that worthy inquired.

"Good luck and bad," answered Hunter. "I tried to kill the woman, and failed, but I did get the disguises we need for our business to-night!"

"Excellent! Just as well that you did not succeed, and you were crazy to try it. Such an accident would have spoiled everything for this evening's performance, you ought to have known."

CHAPTER IX.

A GLIMPSE OF THE PAST.

WHILE we have purposely omitted the talk between Hunter and this man Mulvern, the foregoing is sufficient to show that they had come to an understanding.

That there was a double scheme on foot needs not to be said, now. But, whether or not both or either of these schemes would be carried out, remains to be seen in the chapters to follow.

In his visit to the grounds, Hunter had seen nothing of Jumping-Jack.

Jack had seen him, once, but this time the

fellow's disguise fooled even the keen eyes of Jumping-Jack.

Deceived once, he was likely to be again, for Jack was only a country boy after all, and it was just possible that he would be overcome and disposed of before the night's work commenced.

When the performance was over Jack made his way to Sam Bruce's tent.

"Well, what did you think of it?" Sam asked.

"Immense!" cried Jack. "What did you think of that woman who wanted to lay claim to your child?"

"Say, do you know her?"

"Yes, sure; she had a child stolen from her a good while ago."

Jack related the circumstances as they were known to him, and the clown and "Mlle. Lucie" listened with interest.

"It is a strange story, almost like a romance," the handsome woman observed.

"Yes, and there is another chapter comin' that will be stranger still," declared Jumping-Jack.

"Yes? What do you mean?"

"I've got my optic on the feller what stole that child."

"You?"

"Yes, me."

"Why don't you expose him, then, and have him arrested?"

"I haven't got the proof all down fine yet, that's the reason. Just give me a little time, and I'll yank him."

"Who is he?"

"Never mind that, now; he is standin' in with this feller what is tryin' to steal your child, and they want to play the same trick over again. But, they won't do it while Jumpin'-Jack is around!"

Jack jumped up, cracked his heels, flopped over and came down in his same tracks, without apparent exertion.

Just then Mr. Murray appeared, bringing with him Farmer Cooper and his wife.

"Bruce, these good people want to see your little girl again," he said. "I have heard something of their story, and you can't use them too well."

Mrs. Cooper entered first, trembling.

"You are the child's mother?" she asked of Mlle. Lucie.

"Yes, madam," the answer.

"May I hold her on my lap, just for a minute, while I look at her pretty face?"

"Certainly you may. Bess, go to the kind lady, and let her love you, for she once had a little girl very much like you, she says."

The child obeyed, half timidly.

"God bless you for your goodness!" the woman said, with trembling tone. "You need not be afraid of me, little deary, for you are the image of the little girl I lost, my little Lucy."

She placed the child upon her lap, as she sat on a stool in the tent, and toyed with its hair as she looked fixedly upon its sweet face.

"It is the very face of my lost darling," she said, half to herself. "Don't you think she is like Lucy, Albert?"

"Yes, she certainly does look a good deal like her, that's so," the farmer admitted.

"If we could keep her," the woman sighed.

"We could not spare her," said the fond mother, pleasantly. "We could not live without our baby Bess."

"Yes, but you are bringing her up to a hard, rough life, as you must know, and she is so young and tender a flower. Couldn't you let me take her and bring her up for you?"

The mother laughed, but it was a painful effort.

"No, no," she said quickly. "This life may seem rough to you, but it is all right when you're used to it. No, no, we cannot spare Bess."

"But, we are worth a fine farm, my husband and me, and we have several thousand dollars besides; let us have this child, and every cent of it shall go to her when we lay down our heads."

"You ask an impossibility, madam," spoke up the clown. "Besides, we have just come into a fortune ourselves, and can leave this life at any time."

Mrs. Cooper sighed deeply.

"It will seem like losing my child again, to part with this one," she said. "I wish we had remained at home, Albert, and hadn't come out to see the show at all. I shall never get over this."

"Yes, I wish we had," the man answered.

"How long is it since your little girl was taken?" the mother of Baby Bess asked.

"It is seventeen years this summer."

"Let me see, she must be a young woman about twenty three by this time, then, if she was the age of Baby Bess."

"Yes, if she is living, but who can say?"

"That is true. Did you live here at the time?"

"Yes, we have never lived anywhere else."

"And you never heard a word about her?"

"Not a single word. Oh! you can't imagine how terrible it was."

"Yes, I can imagine it, too, for it is something we have been in dread of in regard to Baby Bess. I should go mad!"

"It would be a blessing if you could if it should happen. But, what have you to fear for her? Who would be so heartless as to take her from you in that way?"

"It is hardly worth the while to tell the story, madam. It is a man who was in love with me and who wanted to marry me when I gave my hand to dear Sam here, and he swore he would have revenge."

Mrs. Cooper was pale again, and she looked at her husband.

"It is our own story over again, Albert," she said. "You remember all about John Witman, the poor, worthless fellow?"

"I remember him well enough," was his response, "and I have never quite give up the idea that he had something to do with the disappearance of our little Lucy, either."

The farmer's face was drawn, and there was a hardness in his tone.

"What was his name?" asked Mlle. Lucie.

"John Witman; he is now known as Old Wit, the bum. He is a good-for-nothing fellow who does not draw a sober breath from one end of the year to the other."

"Yes, and I have got a iron in the fire for him, you bet!" cried Jumping-Jack, unable to contain himself any longer. "I am goin' for that feller, Mr. Cooper, for I feel certain he's the man that did take your little girl off."

"Hal! what is that you say?"

"That's what I said, and I'm goin' to prove it on him, too."

"Say, ain't you the boy they call Jack, that I offered a home to once, about a year ago?"

"I'm the same Jack, sir, and I know you. I felt obliged to you, but I wasn't never cut out to be a farmer, and there was no use foolin' you."

"But, do you know anything against Old Wit? If you do it is your duty to let me know about it at once, and I'll attend to him. I have allus thought in my heart he done it."

"You hold on just a little bit, sir," said Jack, and give me a chance at him, and I'll find out all about it."

"Yes, but what can a boy like you do against a man?"

"Didn't I put him in the cooler once?"

"Well, yes, that's so."

"And I kin do it again, you bet. I'll bring him to time quicker'n I kin jump

over a four-foot fence, and I can do that just a trifle soon."

With that Jack turned a standing somerset, and continued to turn, making his way out of the tent in this fashion, and the clown had to laugh at him, while at the same time he had to admire.

"That fellow is going to make a performer," he said.

"He is coming to nothing," declared the farmer, shaking his head. "I offered him a home with me, but he wouldn't take it. 'Fraid of work, I guess."

"Hasn't he got any home?"

"No, he merely hangs on around town; Lord knows what he'll come to, and he is such a bright fellow that it's a pity, too."

"If that's the case, he is all right," said the clown, confidently. "Murray will take care of him, I think. He'll be a card, and Murray will bring him out. I'll put a flea in his ear. But, we'll have to ask to be excused, now."

CHAPTER X.

JUMPING-JACK IN A BOX.

"HELLO, Jumping-Jack, there you are, eh?"

"Yes, sir, here I am, and you've only got to pull the string to set me off."

"Well, that's what I want to do; I want you to come into the tent and show me just how good a tumble you can do."

Jack's face colored; the golden opportunity had come!

The man who had spoken to him thus was Murray, the superintendent of the big show.

They entered the big tent, where they found the spring-board and some of the tumblers' paraphernalia still in place as it had last been used, and Murray told Jack to try it.

A good many of the performers were on hand to see the experiment.

Murray must have told them of his intention, though they had all heard of the boy tumbler before that.

"All right, if you'll bear the funeral 'spences, sir," assured Jack.

"We'll take the chance of that, youngster."

So, Jack got up on the spring-board to test it, finding that it was something almost new in his jumping practice.

He first jumped standing, using the spring instead of a run, and his very first effort resulted in a double somerset with ease and grace, winning applause from those who saw him do it.

"Bravo!" cried one of the best tumblers in the show. "You'll make a good one, boy."

"That is what I think about him," said Murray. "I'm going to have him, too, if I can get the consent of his parents."

"Shall I run and try it, now?" asked Jack.

"Yes, take a run; you can't hurt yourself if you strike the pads."

So, Jack took a good start and made a leap off into the air with the lightness of a feather, seemingly.

Over and over and over he went, and he had begun the fourth turn when he discovered that he had come down upon the pads, but the fall had not hurt him in the least, and he leaped up lightly.

His audience was cheering.

"How many times was that?" Jack asked. "Seemed to me I was makin' about ten, more or less."

"You made three whole ones, anyhow," answered Murray.

"That's good."

"Have you any parents, boy?"

"Noap."

"Any relations?"

"Got one old aunt, but I ain't proud of her."

"Well, do you think she would give consent to your joining this show?"

Jack's heart almost stood still.

"Give consent!" he cried. "Mister, she's

only hopin' I'll die or run away, I take it, and she'd give you a premium to take me off her hands—not that I'm on 'em very hard, but it sort o' pains her to see me goin' around hungry and half clothed, an' she's too stingy to do anything for me."

"Then just consider yourself as belonging to this show, and we'll give you a little practice and a few lessons and bring you out."

"Whoop ee!" cried Jumping-Jack, and he started and ran around the ring. "But the clown will kill me the first time I kick up sawdust."

Some of the performers shook hands with the boy, and it was the happiest hour of his life.

When Murray went out he found two men who wanted to see him.

They were rather seedy-looking, down-at-the-heel fellows, and their appearance indicated that they were little short of tramps.

"Well, what is it?" the showman demanded.

"We want work," spoke one of the men.

"Kin ye help us out?"

"What can you do?"

"Anything we're told to do, and you'll find us willing," was the civil answer given.

"Where's Browning? Send Browning here."

This to some of the men belonging to the show.

A foreman soon appeared, and he was told to put the two men in his gang.

It happened that the circus was short handed, and Murray was hiring anything that came along, just then.

Perhaps it was this fact that had made Hunter a little over-confident that morning, but it had not saved his bacon in the least. When Murray decided that he must go, that had settled it.

The two new men were given work to do, and no more was thought of them.

These men were none other than Hunter and Mulvern.

Nothing further of moment took place during the afternoon, and the time for the evening performance drew on.

If there had been a crowd in the afternoon it promised to be even greater at night, and quite a number of additional seats had been supplied around the ring.

It was getting late in the season, and it was dark by the time the doors were open for admission.

The crowd poured in at a great rate immediately.

It was about this time that a man accosted Jumping-Jack, as he was about to enter the menagerie tent.

"Have you seen Mr. Murray?" the man asked.

"Not lately," answered Jack.

"You are the feller they call Jumping-Jack?"

"Yes."

"Well, Mr. Murray is lookin' for you, and he was out by the last stable tent a minute ago."

"All right, I'll find him," said Jack, and he was off at once.

He ran out and around to the place mentioned, for he had taken in a good understanding of the lay of the camp.

When he came near to the tent indicated by his informant strong hands suddenly seized him, a hand was clapped over his mouth, and struggle as he would he was powerless to free himself.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Murray wants to see ye," one of his captors hissed. "He wants to see ye real bad."

"But he won't know where to find ye," muttered the other.

"And won't that be too bad, too bad."

They laughed, while they proceeded to bind and gag their captive in the best manner imaginable.

Well under the shadow of the tent, where no one was likely to interfere with them, they were as silent as possible and made all the haste they could with their evil work.

As soon as they had the boy bound they laid him on the ground.

"Now, what do you say?" whispered one.

Jack recognized the voice of Tom Hunter, and he knew that he was in the hands of one who would show him no mercy.

He had been keeping a lookout for this fellow, but had not seen him for some time.

The other he did not know, but suspected who it was.

"I think my plan is best," answered the other.

"He might be discovered, that's all."

"No more likely than if we throw him over that back fence, as you said, and we might be discovered doin' it."

"So we may be in the other, and what then?"

"Roll him in somethin', and it will look as if we are packin' up the property."

"Which we have no business to do, in our present jobs. But, we have got to act quick, so come along with him."

Jumping-Jack was picked up and carried away.

They kept well in the shadows with him, and coming to a lonesome spot, put him down again.

One of the fellows now ran off, presently returning with some rugs and other stuffs belonging to the ring, and into these Jack was rolled.

He could hardly breathe, and felt that he was about at the end of his earthly career of usefulness, but when they picked him up again it somehow freed his mouth, and he was not so uncomfortable.

He was carried to where some chests were standing, and into one of these, on the top of the others, the helpless boy with circus on the brain was put.

This chest would not be opened till after the night performance, and by that time their work would be accomplished and they would be out of reach.

Jumping Jack was in a pretty bad fix."

CHAPTER XI.

THE OLD BUM IN TROUBLE.

THERE was a man in Warrenton who seemed to be out in the cold, as it were.

This neglected individual was John Witman or Old Wit, as he was better known. He had seen nothing of his new friend, Hunter.

The truth of the matter was, Hunter had little or no further use for him, now that he had fallen in with Pete Mulvern, and he had nothing to fear from Old Wit, since he would hardly dare to reveal anything.

Old Wit had spent the whole afternoon hanging around the hotel where he had parted with Hunter.

He could not understand why the fellow did not return.

As night came on he made his way to the circus-grounds, determined to look him up if he was to be found.

His search was fruitless, however, for the fellow was not to be found. It was not because he was not there, though, for he saw the old man looking for him and grinned to himself.

On account of Hunter, Old Wit had missed the performance in the afternoon.

He was determined to see the evening show, if possible.

Just how it was to be done, he did not know, for he had not the wherewith to pay his admission. His appetite for rum kept his pocket drained constantly.

He hung around, when he had given up his search for Hunter, and wandered idly around among the tents, talking here and there with any one who would listen to him, and he was loud in his praise of the circus.

Little he thought that he was going to get himself into trouble.

In his meanderings he came finally to the entrance to the private tent of Sam Bruce and his wife, where he looked in.

"Mlle. Lucie" was there, and Baby Bess was asleep on a cot just behind a flap partition of the canvas.

The bummer poked in his head, to learn what this particular tent was for, and at sight of him the woman gave a cry of alarm.

"Durnation!" ejaculated the old bum.

He was staring at the woman with eyes dilated.

"Pop Turner!" exclaimed the queen of the arena, excitedly.

"Et's me, gal, sure enough!" the old fellow admitted. "Darn me ef I knowed ye afore when I seen ye."

"That was because I had my fine feathers on, I suppose. But, what are you doing here, Pop? I have not seen you before, in a dozen years, it must be. Are you still traveling?"

"No, no; I gave that up long ago, gal."

"And where do you live?"

"Et don't matter; I'm glad to 'a' seen ye again, gal, an' I hope you ar' doin' well. I'll be goin' on, as I'm in a hurry."

He was going, too.

"Hold on," the woman ordered. "I want to talk with you a minute."

"I can't do it nohow; I have got to meet a man, and must be goin'. Mebby I will see you—"

"You will see me now," and she got up and took hold of his shoulder with a firm grip. "Come right in here and sit down, for I must have a chat with you. I don't care if you've got an appointment with the President."

"Let go, gal; d'ye hear?"

His rummy face was pale, and he pulled to get away.

The little woman drew a pistol from her pocket and presented it at his head, saying:

"I wouldn't want to hurt you, Pop Turner, but you are not going out of my sight till you have answered some questions. Come in and sit down, or I'll have to enforce my command in a way you won't like."

There was no help for the bummer, and he had to obey.

He slunk in and sat down on a stool, toying nervously with his rag of a hat, and sullenly asked:

"Wull, what is it?"

"About the earliest recollections I have, Pop Turner, are of you."

"That's nat'ral, seein' that I was daddy to ye after yer mother done her last act an' retired from the ring, gal."

"You speak in a heartless manner, Pop Turner. Would you care to have any one speak so of your mother, if you have any recollection of her? I think not, if there is any feeling left in you."

"Oh, well, that is nothin'; say what you want to."

"I want to know the truth about my parents, that is what I want, and you are the only one who can tell me."

"Well, it's a short story and soon told. Your mammy was a rider, like yourself, and you was a sort o' come by-chance, I take it. That is your whole peddygree, fur as I know."

The young woman's face was flushed.

"Can you tell me my mother's family name?" she asked.

"Durn me if I kin. She was on the bills as Lucy Long, an' that's the long an' short of it all."

"And you never heard her speak of my father?"

"Never a word, gal."

"And that is all you know about me?"

"That's every blessed word, gal, I take my dinner."

"How was it that I came to be left in your keeping, as I was, Pop?"

"Well, your mammy hadn't no other friend, an' she jest asked me to see that you was took keer of."

"If that is all you know, there is no use in pressing you further, so I will let you go, now. I don't suppose we'll ever meet again, Pop, so I'll say good-by for good."

She held out her hand, but at that moment Sam Bruce entered the tent.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Who is this?"

"This is Pop Turner, that I have often told you about," said Mlle. Lucie.

"Pop Turner? Then he wears two names, for he is known as John Witman, or Old Wit. Hold on, old chap; don't be in a rush!"

The bummer showed a disposition to cut short his stay, but the clown laid a hand upon his shoulder and forced him easily down to the stool from which he had just got up.

The bummer's face was now cold and white, and a perspiration was on his forehead, while he was all atremble.

"Then he is the man—" began Mrs. Bruce.

"The man that was suspected of stealing that woman's child, seventeen years ago, Lucy."

"That was a lie," muttered the bummer. "I was not in this part of the country at that time, an' they all know I wasn't. I was set free o' that suspicion at the time."

"At what time, sir?"

"Well, when I come back here to live, somethin' like a dozen years ago."

"Where had you been during that time?"

"Some of the time travelin' with shows; some of the time doin' other work."

"And it was about seventeen years ago, I understand, that this lady, my wife, was placed in your keeping."

"Yes."

"And it was seventeen years ago that the child of your rival in love, Albert Cooper, was stolen from her home. By the way, what show were you with at that time, my man?"

Old Wit was not dealing with "Mlle. Lucie" now.

He was as pale as death, and was trembling from head to foot, a fact that gave ground for suspicion.

"I guess it was Cook & Tucker's," he answered.

"And that was the show in which my wife first appeared. Old man, I'm going to look further into this matter."

"I—I have just told your wife the truth about herself, fur's I know it," the bummer declared. "You won't find nothin' good by pryin' into the past, I give you fair warnin'."

"Better to know the truth than to remain in uncertainty."

The woman, too, was pale.

This talking had awakened Baby Bess, and she now came around from the partition.

At sight of her, Old Wit gave a start, and there was an increased look of alarm in his eyes. She seemed to come like an accusing angel to confront him.

"What's the matter with you now, sir?" demanded Bruce. "Does this child so much remind you of the looks of my wife when she was a little child? Well, I do not wonder. Where's that photograph, Lucy?"

The woman took a picture from her pocket, which she had hunted out from among her effects that afternoon after the visit of Mrs. Cooper, and it was certainly wonderfully like the child before them. It was a likeness of herself at the age of seven, a picture "Pop Turner" had had taken.

CHAPTER XII.

TAKING CARE OF OLD WITMAN.

This picture was put in old Wit's hand.

"Darn me if there ain't a strong likeness," he admitted.

"Of course there is," said Bruce, "and it is suspiciously strong."

"What d'ye mean?"

"I mean that I strongly believe that my wife was the child of the Coopers, and I'm going to know."

Old Wit was getting sullen, now.

"Well, I wish ye luck in findin' out," he muttered. "I have told ye the truth, an' I'd like to see ye prove it anything else. Don't see how you could go about to do it."

"We have got a clue already, sir. There is a boy around here called Jumping-Jack, who knows something about you."

The bummer paled again at this, but stubbornly held out.

"That boy kin lie as tall as he kin jump," he declared, "an' he will have to prove what he says, I reckon. Now, if that's all ye want o' me, I'll be goin' fer I ain't got no time to fool away."

"No, I suppose time is important with you," said Bruce. "But, you are not going in a hurry. I am going to hold fast to you till this thing is cleared up. I'll send for Mr. Murray and have that boy brought here to face you, and we'll see how it will stand."

He forced Old Wit back to his seat.

The old fellow's face was white, but he determinedly persisted.

"Well, do yer worst," he defied. "When you have found out your mistake mebby you will own it. Lucy Long, I didn't think this of you, after the kindness I have done fer you in the past."

"My husband is seeking only the truth," was the response.

"And that I am resolved to have," declared Bruce. "Lucy, can you keep him here a minute?"

"You had better let me go and bring Mr. Murray," the woman suggested. "I can do that better."

"All right; but, take care!"

"I will."

She was off at once, and the moment she had gone Bruce said grimly:

"Now, old man, the best thing you can do is to own up. If you want to get off easy, that is the best thing you can do."

"You wouldn't trap me that way, even if I was guilty," was the sullen retort. "When you have proved the thing against me it would be time enough for me to take water on it."

"And that would be too late to do you any good."

"Can't confess to what I ain't guilty of, all the same. I s'pose you'd like to prove your Lucy a lady, but she was a nobody, sir."

"We'll see," said Bruce, a hard line forming around his mouth.

In a few minutes his wife returned, bringing Harry Murray with her, but not the boy.

Mrs. Bruce had already given the showman an idea of the situation, and upon his coming in he took a keen survey of the old bummer.

"You are the fellow I saw this morning," he declared. "You started and stared at Baby Bess when I had her in my arms and was about to put her in her place in the line of parade."

"I can't deny that," admitted the old bummer.

"You thought you recognized her."

"I knowed she looked mighty like the child of Lucy Long, of course."

"And you had some conversation about the matter with Tom Hunter, which was overheard."

"What if it was?"

"That is what we are going to attend to. We'll find the boy that overheard the talk, and I think we can bring you to time," said Bruce. "I believe you are the man who stole the child from the Coopers."

"And you think your wife is that stolen child, Sam?" asked Murray.

"I do."

"Well, it is possible, but we have got to prove it. It is strange where Jumping-Jack can be; the men can't seem to find him."

Just then a man came to the tent.

"We can't find the boy, boss," he reported.

"Have you seen anything of Hunter?" the showman asked immediately.

"No, nobody seems to 'a' seen him, either. Hope he hasn't got in a crack at the youngster."

"He must be found," cried Murray. "I'd give a big sum rather than see that boy come to harm. Find him, Smith, if possible; ask everybody you see, and have them all hunt for him."

"Yes, sir."

"And what about this fellow?" Murray asked.

"We must not let him get out of our hands," said Bruce. "I we do, he will give us the slip."

"You are right. I'll tell you what you had better do, you had better take out a warrant for him and let the authorities lock him up, and put the case in Mr. Cooper's hands."

"You'll have your trouble for your pains," growled Old Wit. "You can't prove nothin' ag'in' me."

"Say, do you know where that boy is?"

"No, I don't; but I hope he has broke his cussed neck!"

"But, there is no time to attend to it before the performance," said the woman.

"You are right," agreed Bruce. "No matter; I'll set Jones to watch the man and he will not get away, that is certain. Will you send him here, Mr. Murray?"

"That is the very idea. Yes, I'll send him."

Murray took his leave.

"You see we mean business," said Bruce. "I believe we are on the right track, and we are not going to give you the chance to get out of our hands."

"Who is Jones?" asked Old Wit.

"He's one of our detectives."

"Well, he won't have nothin' to detect, in me. What I've said I'll stick to, now, no matter what comes."

"We must see that woman again, Sam," said Lucy. "You know I have kept many of my childhood things, and there may be something in the lot she will recognize."

"And what if it should turn out that she is your mother?"

"I should not be sorry, for my heart almost aches for her, after the way she took to our Baby Bess."

"Well, we cannot control the events, any further than to keep this fellow from getting away. Hello! here is Jones already. Jones, we have got a little job for you to undertake."

The matter was explained, and the detective led the old bummer out.

There was no further time to spare, now, as they would need every minute to prepare for the evening performance.

If Old Wit was eager to see the performance, he was destined to disappointment, now, for the detective took him around to one of the stable tents, where he made him prisoner.

But, the old bummer had no longer a desire to see the show, all he wanted was the chance to make himself scarce.

He knew there was danger in the air.

The hunt for Jumping-Jack was kept up, but he was not found, and finally the time for the performance came, and the band struck up.

Jack had now been a prisoner in the big chest for twenty minutes or more, and he was finding it anything but a comfortable place. He must have suffocated, but for the fact that the chest was cracked.

Even as it was, he was perspiring freely, and felt as if he was in an oven, wrapped up as he was.

He made every effort to free his hands, but that was impossible, and of course it was just as impossible to free his mouth of the gag that prevented him from calling for help.

In his struggles he made one discovery, though it might not amount to anything.

This was, that the chest he was in did not rest solidly upon the others.

The movements he made caused it to rock.

Jack heard the band strike up, and knew the performance had commenced, and he longed to be where he could see it.

But, that was not all, he knew he must get out if he was to keep his promise to Sam Bruce that he was to keep an eye upon Baby Bess that night to see that no harm came to her.

The thought rendered him desperate, but what could he do? There was no escape for him, and he would have to remain where he was until the box was needed, unless something unforeseen chanced to turn up in his favor, and that was not worth hoping for.

CHAPTER XIII.

A HEINOUS SCHEME IN MIND.

THE performance was on.

If the crowd had been great in the afternoon, it was greater in the evening by some hundreds.

Every performer was at his best, and no one could suspect that the mind of the leading clown was fixed upon anything other than the nonsense of the hour.

The very reverse was true, however. He did well his part, but all the time his mind was elsewhere, thinking of the various events of the day, and the mystery that he hoped soon to clear up.

So it was with Murray.

He was greatly worried about the disappearance of Jumping Jack.

The word was passed, and all the employees of the show who were idle or could be spared were looking for him.

One of these was Jones, the so called detective of the show, who had disposed of his prisoner, Old Wirt, in the manner we have shown, and who was looking around the town.

The two men in disguise, Tom Hunter and Pete Mulvern, had so far escaped detection.

After the performance commenced these two wandered off together toward one of the stable tents that was out of the way.

"Well, when is it to be done?" asked Mulvern.

"Right after Baby Bess performs and comes from the ring."

"And you think it will work?"

"See no reason why it should not. I'll tend to my part of it, and you see to yours."

"But, there is a big risk to run, letting that lion out of his cage, you know, and we may get more than we bargain for before we are done with it."

"I'll take chances of that, and you can do the same. I'll be off in a hurry, and you can seek a place of safety before I open the door, and when the excitement is on you can do the trick."

"I think it will work."

"Yes, of course it will. Bruce will be one of the first to try to capture the brute."

"And others will shoot at it, and a stray bullet may hit the clown and that will be the end of it. A pure and simple accident, of course."

"That's it; now you have it."

"And I'm greatly obliged to you for your help. I wish I could do something more to aid you."

"Don't see how you can. I'd like to fall in with that old sot, Old Wit, now, for I will need a guide till I get well out of

reach, and he must know the country around."

"Then jest scoot around here and set me free, durn ye!"

This in a hoarse whisper, from the other side of the canvas, and it caused both men to start.

They looked at each other, in the very dim light, and Hunter asked.

"Is that you, Old Wit?"

"Course it's me."

"And what are you doing there?"

"I'm a prisoner."

"Prisoner!"

"Yes."

This in whispers.

"Stay right here, Mulvern, and I'll sneak around and free him."

"All right, but take good care about it, for if anything turns up now we are dished, maybe for all time."

"I'll take care."

Hunter left his accomplice and moved around and entered the tent, and was not long in finding Old Wit, by the light of a lantern that hung in the center of the tent.

He freed him at once, and the old bummer followed him out.

They joined Mulvern immediately, and the three moved off to the rear of all the tents, where they would not be likely to be overheard again.

"How came you there?" asked Hunter.

"Through that cussed boy," the bummer growled.

"Well, we have taken care of him so's he won't bother us any more."

"I'm glad of it. But, I heard you say that you wanted me to guide ye some'ers, didn't I?"

"Yes, you have it right. I am going to steal that kid, and want you to guide me off to a safe place in the woods, and then help me out to-morrow so I can get away."

"I'll try it, for I have no love fer any of 'em, now, and this will be a dig at—"

But, he stopped short and did not finish.

"We understand," said Hunter.

"All right, ef ye do. I heard your plans laid out, an' I want to tell ye I ain't got no business around here if you are goin' to let that big lion out."

"That is what we are going to do."

"Then I ain't in it. I'll bid you good-evenin'," and Old Wit started off at once.

He had not taken three paces, however, when their hands fell upon him.

"No you don't!" said Hunter, grimly.

"You have got to aid me, or we'll put you back where we found you."

"If ye try it I'll squeal on ye."

"We'll gag you."

"I'll raise a row and block your game."

"You try it and I'll slit your throat!"

hissed Mulvern, displaying a knife as he made the threat.

This brought Old Wit to time quicker than anything else could have done, for he had a dread of a knife anyhow, and there was that about the threat to convince that the man meant what he said.

"But, we'll all be killed," the bummer urged.

"No we won't, for the lion will never get out of the tent alive," assured Hunter.

"They'll shoot it if it won't go into its cage."

"Yes, but what do ye want to let it out fer?"

"To make an excitement so that we can carry out other plans. Now, will you aid me or will you not?"

"What is it I'm to do?"

"You must guide me to a safe place in the woods as soon as I get the brat."

"And go to jail if I get found out."

"You'll go to jail anyhow, if we leave you here in the hands of the showmen, for Bruce is onto you, now."

"Well, I s'pose I'll have ter do it."

"I guess you will. Now for the plan,

for there is no time to spare. Which is the best way for me to go with the brat soon's I get her?"

"I would say to cut right back across this field to the rear fence, and then up that back street to the lane and so on out to the woods, where I know of a wood-road that leads to a old cabin."

"Good enough. Can you find it in the dark?"

"Yes, easy enough."

"All right then, that's the plan."

"But, I don't want to be near that lion when ye let him out."

"Don't see how it can be helped."

"Can't I wait by the fence till ye come?"

"You would wait till we had gone, and that would be the last we'd see of you."

"No, I swear—"

"Don't swear, for your oath is no better than your word. We won't trust you, and that's all there is of it."

"But, I'll be scared out o' my wits, and won't be worth a cent, I know. My legs will be so weak I couldn't run, an' what good would I be to ye? Let me wait right by the fence."

"I'll tell you what," said Mulvern.

"What is it?"

"We'll gag him and tie him to a post of the fence. You can cut him loose in a quarter of a minute, when you come."

"The very idea! That's the way we'll fix it, old man, and there's no use of your objecting to the plan, for we'll carry it out. Come right along now, and we'll fix you out."

Old Wit objected strongly, but that was all the good it did him.

He was taken to the fence, and there secured to a post by his hands tied behind his back and a gag was put in his mouth. There he was left, and the two villains hastened back to carry out their plans.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MOMENT OF EXTREME PERIL.

IN the mean time Jumping-Jack had been trying, at intervals, to free his hands, but, as said before, the task was hopeless.

He had discovered, however, as stated, that the box he was in did not rest in a perfectly solid manner upon the others, but it was some time before he saw how he was to use the circumstance to his advantage.

Finally it came to him.

"What a ninny I am," he muttered, "not to think of that before! Reckon I'll be a mummy, if I keep on sweatin' this way. Wonder if I can't shake this box enough to upset it, and take the chances of a fall in it? Seein' that it's cracked, it may split open an' let me out."

The performance in the big tent had now been on for some time.

No sooner thought of than the boy set about putting the thought into practice as best he could.

There was room and to spare in the big box, but Jumping-Jack was so wrapped up that he had but little use of himself. He could not move arms or legs, but the idea came to him to try to roll.

He tried it.

The box rocked but it did not fall.

As this was Jack's only hope, however, he kept it up at intervals, hoping that it might possibly draw attention to the box.

This seemed more likely than that he would cause it to fall, for, should any one pass near when the box was rocking, that person would certainly want to investigate the strange phenomenon.

Practice, however, taught the boy a lesson.

He found that by starting the box in motion, and keeping that motion regular, the box toppled more and more at each movement.

Profiting by this, he started once again,

after a spell of rest, resolved to keep it up till something happened, if he could possibly hold out, and so he did, too, to his satisfaction.

More and more the box toppled, and finally it overbalanced and down it went with a bang and a crash.

"Here we go, anyhow," thought Jack, when he felt it going. "It is life or death, this act, I guess. But, I can't get hurt much, the way I'm wrapped up."

This was true.

The box struck the ground on one corner, and it was split from end to end.

It dropped to its side immediately, which had the effect to split it yet more, and it dropped open wide and Jack rolled out.

"Thunderation!"

So cried one of the showmen, who ran along just at that moment.

The box had come near to striking him, and he looked to see who had been so careless in handling the property.

He saw no one, and this caused him to stop to investigate what it was that had rolled out of the broken box, and as he stooped Jumping-Jack gave forth a groan that caused him another exclamation.

The showman felt with his foot.

"Who are ye?" he demanded.

Another moan.

The man now stooped and felt with his hands, carefully, for it was in too dark a spot for him to see well.

Finding that it was a boy, and that he was bound and gagged, the man thought immediately of the missing Jumping-Jack, and rightly guessed that he had found the little fellow.

It took him but a moment to unwind the rugs and other wrappings and to free his mouth.

"Whew! that was a roaster!" cried Jack.

"Are you the boy called Jumpin'-Jack?" asked the man.

"Yes, I'm that same misguided youth," answered Jack, drolly.

"And how came ye here?"

"Fell into the hands of the enemy," the response.

"Well, the boss is lookin' fer you, and is worried, so you had better show yourself soon's ye can."

"All right, you just free my hands and feet for me, and I'll be off to find him in about two twitches of a wink, more or less. I have had a good rest, now, and feel like getting on."

The man laughed while he set the boy free, and when he had done Jack leaped lightly upon his feet.

Just at that moment came a cry of alarm from the direction of the menagerie.

It was repeated; then came a woman's scream, and followed immediately other cries and screams of greatest terror.

"What the deuce is up?" cried the man who had freed Jack.

"Quickest way to find out is to go and see," answered Jumping-Jack, and he was off like a shot.

The reader has guessed what the trouble was.

The big lion, called Samson, was out of his cage, and terror was struck to every heart.

It was the work of Tom Hunter!

On their return to the grounds, after securing Old Wit, they had set about carrying out their diabolical design.

Hunter knew the programme of the performance well, and could tell just when each member of the company would be on and doing his or her part, and he timed his action accordingly.

They made their way into the menagerie, and watched their opportunity.

It came, and they seized it.

Hunter unlocked the door of the lion's cage, and Mulvern placed himself where he was in some degree out of danger and from

where he could command a full view of the scene.

Hunter having unlocked the door of the cage, darted under it to the other side, with a pole in his hand.

That pole he pushed into the cage, and placed its end against the opposite door.

When he was ready, a push with the pole would open the door.

They waited, then, for the right moment.

Presently out from the arena dashed Mlle. Lucie, and it was then the turn of Baby Bess to do her act.

Mrs. Bruce dismounted and surrendered her horse, and waited to be near her child when she should come out. She was clad in a habit, the act she had just performed demanding that kind of dress.

The music told how the act was progressing, broken now and then when the clown had something to say, and finally the act ended.

Hunter had been waiting for this.

Mrs. Bruce was standing only a little distance from the cage of Samson.

This seemed to suit the inhuman wretch all the better, and shoving open the door he gave the lion a prod.

There was instantly a terrific growl, and turning and seeing the door of the cage wide open, the horrified woman gave voice to a wild scream.

Hunter had dropped his pole at once, and running behind the cages, came out at the exit just in time to intercept the horse of Baby Bess when it came out, and he caught the bridle.

He ran with the animal across the space of the tent, and out, while every eye present was fixed upon Mlle. Lucie and the lion.

Only a brief moment had elapsed, yet the scene had changed.

The growl and the woman's scream had caused every eye to turn in that direction.

Another scream followed, with cries from others, and with a growl again the lion leaped from its cage, striking the woman to the ground as it did so, and now it stood over her.

Cries and screams of horror were heard on every hand.

Other performers and employees ran in from every direction, and in from the ring, as quickly as possible, came the clown and ringmaster.

About the time of their appearance, Jumping-Jack rolled in under the tent, to find out what it was all about, and he discovered that he had come in at a point where a man was standing on a wheel of one of the cages.

He did not see Jack, and it had been impossible to hear him, in all the uproar, and he was looking through the bars of the cage, with a pistol in his hand.

Jack stopped right where he was, with an eye upon this man.

But, to return to Mlle. Lucie.

She was lying on her back, and the lion had its left fore paw clutched in her riding habit near her hip, while he glared at those in front of him.

For a second every man had stopped and recoiled, thrilled with horror and almost paralyzed, but it was only for a moment, when the clown and the ringmaster made a leap forward together.

"Back, for your lives!" cried another voice, the same instant. "Let me attend to that fellow, or the woman will be killed before your eyes!"

CHAPTER XV.

EXCITEMENT THE WILDEST.

THE new-comer was a man of stern face and keen eyes.

He had a heavy mustache, wore a square coat and derby hat, and in his right hand he carried a heavy whip.

The tip of this whip was set with sharp steel spurs instead of the usual snap, and

the extraordinary size of it made it a weapon to be dreaded, once a taste of it had been administered.

This man was on the bills as "Professor Mordaunt, the Lion-Tamer," but in private life he was known as Charlie McHartley.

With his words, he thrust the others aside and faced the lion!

The eyes of the man and those of the beast met, and there was a moment of terrible suspense.

All who beheld it held their breath with very horror—or nearly all, for we must except the man who was standing on the wheel of one of the cages, him with the pistol in his hand.

The lion-tamer bent lower and advanced inch by inch upon the beast, and the lion crouched and gave a warning roar.

Mlle. Lucie lay as still as death, her eyes turned imploringly upon her rescuer.

Suddenly Charlie McHartley gave a blow with the whip.

The steel thorns struck the lion on the nose, and the blood spurted forth instantly.

With a roar like thunder, the lion released its prey, crouched back, and the next instant had sprung forward at its tormentor.

No sooner released, than Mlle. Lucie was upon her feet, and, running for her life in the direction in which her child had been led, she disappeared from sight at once.

As though he did not see her, Sam Bruce stood as if rooted to the spot.

His eyes were upon the lion and the lion-tamer, and he and Murray were almost the only ones to hold their ground.

Murray had armed himself with an iron bar, and was ready to aid the tamer if chance offered, or if it was found that he needed aid, for, possibly, he would prove master of the situation.

But this could hardly be hoped for.

In order to save Mlle. Lucie he had had to draw the rage of the beast upon himself, and the consequences could hardly be calculated.

As the lion made its leap, McHartley dodged, and with the butt of his whip dealt a blow on the head of the king of beasts that must have stunned an animal of less power than old Samson.

"Shoot the lion!" some one cried out.

"Yes, yes, shoot it; that's the only way!"

Instantly came one or two shots, but without effect.

"Mister, don't you do that again, or I'll break your arm with this rod."

The speaker was Jumping Jack, and the man addressed was the fellow we have mentioned as standing on the wheel of one of the cages.

The man turned upon him instantly, his face pale.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "I'm trying to kill that lion before it can do harm."

"I know better," said Jack, coolly. "You aimed at Sam Bruce, straight as you could, and your bullet made him dodge. Don't you try it again, I warn ye."

And the boy had his weapon ready.

He was armed with a short piece of iron bar, which he held raised for instant use.

"You lie! you young jackanapes!" cried the man.

"No, I don't lie, either, and you know I don't! Now I know what you and that other feller was talkin' about, and—"

"Curse you! take that!"

The man jerk his revolver up to fire at Jumping Jack, and did fire, but the iron rod fell upon his arm just the second before the weapon went off and the bullet was buried in the ground.

With a groan of pain the man dropped the weapon and grabbed his arm, and Jack shouted loudly for help.

Sam Bruce, seeing who it was, ran to him immediately.

But, meantime, the lion.

Before it could turn to leap aside, the

tamer was plying his whip upon it with all his might, bringing a spurt of blood at every crack.

The lion turned; the blows fell upon its head and face, thick and fast, and it was more than the king of beasts could stand. With a wild scream it turned and dashed away.

It had made its escape!

Instantly rose the cry that there was a lion at large, and excitement reigned supreme.

People in the great tent made a rush, the side of the tent was torn down, and in their mad haste they did as much harm to themselves as a dozen lions would have done, probably.

All was confusion and terror.

The man who had attempted the life of the clown tried to run away, now, but Jumping-Jack sprung before him, swinging his bar of iron with full intent.

"Don't you move," he cried, "or I'll brain ye like I would a mad-dog!"

"What's this?" asked the clown, running up.

"This man tried to kill you, that's what," said Jack.

"The little fool lies," cried the man. "I fired at the lion."

"If you did, you made a mighty poor shot, that is all I can say," declared Sam. "Your bullet came within six inches of my head, that I'll swear."

"Then it wasn't my bullet, that's all. I was not the only one who fired. I had no reason to shoot at you; why should I have? This boy is crazy, and ought to be in a madhouse."

"Maybe you'll say you didn't try to kill me, too," cried Jack. "Mr. Bruce, it is just as I tell ye, and you don't want to let him get off."

"I'll take care that he don't, my boy," said Sam, and he laid hold upon the fellow.

The man made an effort to get off, but it was useless.

Jack had partly disabled his right arm, but then he would have been no match for the clown, anyhow.

"It's a lie!" the fellow cried. "What should I want to kill you for? And as to the boy, I'd scorn to think of doing such a thing as to kill him."

"Ha! a false beard!" cried Bruce.

"Who is this fellow?"

The speaker was Murray.

His face was white, and his eyes were flashing with passion.

"A fellow who tried to kill me," declared the clown. "He was with that Mr. Taggard who gave me those papers to-day."

"And did you let that lion out of his cage, fellow?"

"No, I didn't."

"Well, some one did, for the beast could not have got out otherwise. Five hundred dollars for the man who opened that cage, be he dead or alive!"

"Sam! Sam! Sam!"

Wildly rung out the cry, and the clown's wife was seen running and seeking him, calling as she ran, and it could be seen that she was in great distress of mind.

Had the lion killed Baby Bess?

"This way! this way!" cried Sam.

The wife heard him and she ran toward him.

"My God!" she came crying. "Sam!—Baby Bess!"

The clown reeled and almost fell, and his prisoner escaped his grasp.

Murray, however, laid hands upon Mulvern immediately and detained him, while the clown staggered toward his wife.

Bruce had only one thought in mind, the lion.

"Is she dead?" gasped Sam.

"No, no; she has been carried off! I do not know where she is!"

"Did the lion—"

"No, no, not the lion; I believe it must

have been Hunter, in disguise. He took her and the horse just as she came from the ring."

"Great heavens! I could almost say, better far that it had been the lion. Murray, this explains it; it was Hunter who let the lion out, and he did it for just this purpose."

"Which is proof enough to clear me," spoke up Mulvern.

"Not by a heapin' sasser-full," cried Jumping-Jack. "It begins to loom up in my eye, now, that you an' him was in cahoots in this deal, an' you are as deep in the mud as he is in the mire!"

"Boy, you have hit it!" exclaimed Sam Bruce. "Hold him, Mr. Murray, if you ever did me a favor in your life. I must make an effort to find my child, though God only knows where I shall look for her. Nerve yourself, Lucy, for this blow will kill you if you don't."

CHAPTER XVI.

FARMER COOPER'S SCHEME.

"I'm with you," cried Jumping-Jack, following the clown and his wife. "We must find the Rose of the Ring, or bust!"

"Hold on, boy! I want you!" shouted Murray. "I want you to go and bring your town constable here to take care of this fellow for me. Then I want to use you further, and that at once."

"Kerreck!" cried Jack. "I'm your jigger, boss; you have only to say the word and I'm up an' doin'."

He was off like a shot, and evidently knew where to go.

Before the excitement had begun to subside he was back again with the man he had gone to fetch.

Instead of subsiding, though, the excitement was on the increase, for the report that a lion had escaped from the menagerie had spread like wild-fire throughout the town.

During Jumping-Jack's absence the fellow Mulvern had tried in every way to induce Murray to release him.

He had argued first his innocence; then finally had offered to buy off.

This only served to fasten the guilt upon him the more securely; and when the constable was brought Murray turned the prisoner over to him, with strict caution against allowing him to get away.

"Don't you worry," said Jack. "Our constable don't let nothin' go by that comes his way, you bet!"

"Now, Jack, come with me!" the showman ordered. "I can do nothing here till the scare is over; but, meantime, we'll go and gather up that man Taggard. If there is anything in what you have charged, he is in it."

"In it!" cried Jack. "He's in it clear up to his ears. You want me to show you where he is stoppin'?"

"That is it, my boy."

"Well, you won't find him there, for I'll bet he wasn't far away from here when the trouble commenced."

"I don't agree with you."

"Don't ye? Why not?"

"Because, I think he would keep away on purpose to prove an *alibi* in case anything got found out."

"Never thought of that. Bet you beans to buttons that you are right, after all. If you know where he is puttin' up, I kin show ye the way there in no time. Do ye know?"

"Yes, he told me," and Murray named the place.

"I know it like a book," assured Jack. "Come on, and we'll yank him in no time, if he is there."

"Is it far?"

"No."

"So much the better. I'll not be missed for a few minutes, or if I am they will know

I'm somewhere where I'm needed. They know they can trust Murray, I guess, by this time."

They ran, and Murray found he had work to do to keep pace with Jack.

When they reached the place their man was found there, and at sight of Murray his face showed that his heart quaked.

"What is wrong, sir?" he asked. "I hear something about the escape of a lion. Is there any truth in it?"

"It is true, sir," said Murray. "There has been another escape, too."

"Another? What else?"

"Sam Bruce, whom you saw this morning, has escaped with his life."

The showman looked the other squarely in the eyes as he spoke, and he noted that the man quailed before him.

"What do you mean?" the fellow gasped.

"Just what I say. An attempt has been made upon his life, and that man who came here with you has been arrested for it. My business here is to arrest you, for this same offense."

"Arrest me?" in greatest indignation.

"Just that, sir."

"But, by what right do you attempt to arrest me? What do I know about what some one else has done? Far be it from me to try to put any man out of the way, least of all Sam Bruce."

"Well, you will have the chance to prove all that. I am going to take you prisoner, on my own responsibility, and will turn you over to the proper persons as soon as it can be done. Come right along with me, or I'll be under the painful necessity of fetching you in a way you won't like."

The man stormed and resisted, but all to no purpose; he had to go.

He was taken to the lock-up direct, where the constable had just deposited the other.

Murray entered charge against the man, and he, too, was given a place in the "cooler" until the proper time came for him to prove and establish the innocence he claimed.

No time was wasted there.

Still led by Jumping-Jack, who cleared every fence at a jump without touching it, Murray hurried back to the show grounds by a short cut.

The crowd had melted away, and the show people were beginning to collect themselves and bring order out of chaos, and Murray was in demand, now, and was being looked for.

He took in the situation as a whole at a glance, and with a few directions here and there, to foremen, order was restored and the work of taking down and packing up was begun in an orderly manner, yet the men were cautious how they ventured into dark corners.

The lion had not been found, as the preceding words give proof.

Neither had Baby Bess.

By this time every man in the town, almost, who possessed a gun or pistol, was out with that weapon, and a general hunt for the lion was already getting under way.

When Murray had got matters in order around the show, and was ready to give his attention to the finding of Baby Bess, Sam Bruce and his wife appeared, the woman leaning heavily upon her husband and weeping bitterly. She was overcome, and had neither strength nor courage left.

"Murray, what am I to do?" asked Bruce, huskily.

He was still in his ring costume, and was a conspicuous figure. He was almost as much overcome as his wife.

"The first thing to do is to brace up, both of you," declared Murray, not at all unkindly. "This is no time to give way to your grief. Your child is alive and well, no doubt."

"Oh! do you think so, Mr. Murray?"

"Certainly I think so. And we'll have

her, too, before twelve hours pass by. We'll miss our next engagement but what we'll get the child."

"And the lion?"

"The people will take care of the lion."

Just then a voice was heard loudly inquiring for Mr. Murray, "the boss of the show."

"Right this way, sir," Murray called out.

A man came running forward.

It was Albert Cooper!

"They tell me that the child has been stole," he said hurriedly.

"It is the sad truth," answered Murray.

"These parents are almost wild with grief."

"Yes, I know just how they must feel. But, cheer up, for I am here to help in whatever way I kin. I have got an idea for ye, if you think kindly on't."

"Spit it out, uncle, for the love o' goodness!" cried Jumping-Jack.

"What you want is Ned Taylor's bloodhound, an' put him on track o' the skunk, an' if he don't run him down, it will be funny."

"The very thing!" cried Murray.

"Yes, yes," eagerly urged the clown.

"Where does he live? We must go for it without waste of time."

"Don't get excited," urged the farmer.

"I have sent for it, an' it will be here in a short time. What I want to do is to take this lady to stay with my wife till the child is found."

"Excellent!" assented Murray. "Madoiselle Lucie, you must go, and let us men attend to this business."

"Yes, you must go," decided Bruce.

"You can do nothing here."

So, she was led off by the big-hearted farmer, and barely had she gone when a man came up leading a bloodhound. It took but a moment to learn that he was the man the farmer had mentioned.

But, would the plan work aright? Would it be of any avail?

Let us see!

CHAPTER XVII.

WHERE THE TRAIL LED THEM.

ABOUT this same time the so-called detective belonging to the circus put in his appearance.

"That you, Murray?" he hastily asked. "I believe I have a clue, now, to the course taken by the rascal who stole the child, and if it were only daylight—"

"Never you mind daylight," interrupted the man with the dog, promptly. "Bowger is as good at night as he is by daylight, an' all he wants is a track to foller an' he will get there every time."

"A bloodhound?"

"That's what he is."

"Excellent! We'll soon be on track of that scoundrel, now. But, before we get down to business I want to report, Murray, that the other prisoner is missing and can't be found, and maybe he has had a hand in this."

"You mean that drunken bummer?"

"Yes."

"How could he get away?"

"He certainly could not, without help, and he has had help."

"Then it must have been Hunter."

"And if that is the case the man will attempt to guide him, and they will be found together, somewhere. But, that is not all; I have found a broken chest in which somebody—"

"And that somebody was me," chipped in Jumping-Jack. "Never mind 'bout that now. I'll tell ye all about it when the 'citement is over. I was taken prisoner and boxed up by Hunter and his pal."

"And who was the pal?" asked the detective.

"That man Mulvern, what me an' Mr. Murray bagged. But, no time to stop and chin over it now. Let's be doin'."

"That is the word," agreed Murray.

"What is your clue, Jones?"

"Two men were seen climbing the back fence about the time the excitement broke out here, and—"

"And you think Old Wit was one of 'em?" asked the man with the dog.

"Yes, it is just possible that he was."

"And you had him prisoner here?"

"Yes."

"Then take me to the place where he was, let Bowger git one smell of his track, an' if he was one of the two we'll soon be after 'em."

All recognized that they now had their plan straight, and there was no loss of time about putting it to the working.

The dog was taken to the place where Old Wit had been tied and was given a chance to get a knowledge of the scent, and as soon as it was had the animal set off with nose to the ground.

The owner of the dog held the brute by a chain, and followed where it led.

Out of the tent, around the side, then across to the fence, and to the post where the old bummer had been left tied.

There was discovered the string that had bound him, now cut, and while this was not readily understood it gave weight to the evidence they had already that their theory was the right one.

Over the fence and up the street they went, the man with the dog ahead, and Jumping-Jack, Bruce, Murray and the others immediately after him, with at least a hundred men and boys following upon their heels. It was the most exciting chase ever known there.

Out of the street and into a lane, and thence direct for the woods, and the man with the dog uttered an exclamation.

"Ther durn fool!" he cried. "I'll bet I know where he's goin' to. He never thought o' me and Bowger, or he wouldn't 'a' done it. He's made straight fer Looker's old cabin out on the wood road."

At that moment the hound gave forth a yelp that was startling, and tugged at the chain.

"Boys, it's growin' hot!" explained Taylor. "We'll have 'em, now, if they are still there, an' if they take to the woods we've got the means to track 'em. But, I be hanged if I don't think there's a bigger game, by the way Bowger is actin'. Hope we ain't goin' to tackle the lion, b'mighty!"

These words sent a thrill to every heart.

On they pressed, silent but excited, and all who were armed with guns had their weapons ready for instant use.

"There is but one thing I dread," said Bruce to Murray as they pressed forward shoulder to shoulder, "and that is, that the rascal may kill my child rather than give her up."

"He will hardly dare to do that, Sam; he would know what the result would be. This mob would lynch him, sure."

"If he did not take his own life."

"Well, don't look at the gloomy side of it, Bruce. I think it will come out all right; somehow I feel that it is going to do so. The dog is certainly on the track of somebody or something."

"I dread the lion."

"Don't think of it; time enough when we face it."

But, the showman was speaking more encouragingly than he felt, a great deal, and the clown was not deceived.

They were as silent as possible, but there was plenty of noise even so, there being so many of them, and when they were once in the woods they were ever on the alert lest the lion should leap out upon them unseen.

"Yes, that's where he headed for," said Taylor. "He's gone to Looker's old cabin, and if we don't find him there we'll overtake him soon after."

"We ought to have lights," suggested one fellow in the van.

"Not till we need 'em," said Taylor. "It won't do no harm to get some knots ready fer lightin' as ye come along, though."

This was done, by some of the boys and men who had no gun to carry.

So they pushed on and on, and at last those who knew the road gave notice that they were drawing near to the cabin.

As they came near, the crying of a child was heard, mingled with something that sounded very like groans, and Sam Bruce made a dash to run on in advance.

"Keep back! keep back!" warned the owner of the dog. "I feel sure there's bigger game than human here, the way Bowger has been caperin' up, and you might run into that lion's jaws."

"But, my child, my child!"

"She's alive, as you kin hear. Keep cool, now. Boys, make lights!"

They were almost to the cabin, and the crying and the moaning could be heard plainly.

"Bess?" cried out Sam Bruce. "Baby Bess?"

"Papal papa!" was the glad cry in response. "I knew you would come to Bessie, I knew you would!"

Sam made another dash, but Taylor forced him back with an almost blow, at the same time ordering:

"Keep back, I tell ye; keep back fer yer life! Don't ye see the way Bowger is goin' on? Yer child is safe, fer her voice comes from the loft, but I'll bet that lion is in possession below."

"Then make haste! For God's sake make haste!"

"The man is right," spoke up McHartley, the brave lion-tamer, who was one of the crowd. "It is all your life is worth to face that lion if it should happen to be there. We must wait a moment for lights, and then at sight of the lion, if it is here, let every man fire at once."

"You can't capture it, then?" asked Murray.

"It would never be safe, if we could, after this night's work."

"That's so; you are right."

Meantime Bruce had called out to Baby Bess, telling her not to venture down from where she was till he got there.

They had lights, presently, and moved forward, some of those who were armed with rifles going in the lead with Taylor. In a few seconds they were before the cabin.

Several pine-knots were now ablaze, and the face of Baby Bess, white as death, could be seen framed in the narrow, sashless window of the cabin-loft.

There came another moan from the inside of the cabin, below, and immediately a deep-mouthed growl.

"The lion!" was the awed whisper.

There was a thinning of the ranks instantly, and even some of those armed with rifles did not stand their ground.

Charlie McHartley took one of the torches, and holding it so that it blazed up brightly, hurled it into the cabin with force.

The result was magical.

There was a roar calculated to make the stoutest heart quake and out sprung the escaped lion, halting just a second before the door and glaring at the crowd; then with another roar, it darted off into the woods, and not a single shot was fired at the beast!

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONFESSION AND CONCLUSION.

"WHY the mischief didn't you shoot?" cried Charlie McHartley.

The men looked foolish enough. Not a man of them had thought about shooting. The sight of such big game had taken all of the "shoot" out of them.

"Never thought about it," one fellow honestly declared.

And that was the excuse, the only excuse they had to offer; they had not thought about it.

No sooner the lion out of the house, than the clown had snatched a torch from the hand of a boy near him and sprung in to the rescue of his child.

An exclamation was heard from him immediately, but he did not stop in the room below. He made his way to the loft at once.

Taylor and nearly all who had rifles went on in pursuit of the lion, Charlie McHartley with them.

The rest surged forward into the cabin without delay.

A terrible sight met their gaze.

On the floor lay the mangled body of Hunter, and in a corner sat Old Wit, the bumner, himself badly wounded.

"Fer goodness' sake save me!" he cried. "Don't let that beast git in here again, or I'm done up. But, has it gone? Is it safe now? I guess I'm done for, though, just the same."

"Yes, you rascal, I guess you are, and it serves you right," cried Murray, with no showing of pity in his tone.

Sam Bruce came down the ladder with his child hugged to his breast.

"Thank God, I have found her alive and unharmed!" he said fervently.

Then for the first time he beheld the body of Hunter. He had seen only Old Wit in the corner, before.

"Ha! I can feel no pity for him," he said. "The hand of Providence was in it that my child should escape as she did. But, that fellow—he shall tell what he knows!"

Murray had knelt to learn how badly the man was hurt.

"Yes, he must tell what he knows," he declared. "There is no hope for you, my man, and if you expect any mercy in the Beyond, you had better make a clean breast of everything before you go over. We know you hold a secret that concerns the lives of some worthy persons in this town."

"I'll tell what I know on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you'll let me off, in case I git over this."

Murray looked at Bruce.

"You can safely promise it," he responded.

"Yes, you can go free, if you get over the effect of your hurt," the clown gave his promise. "That is, so far as I am concerned."

"But that don't speak of Al. Cooper."

"No, it does not."

"I must have his promise, too, or I won't speak."

"Then haste must be made," said Murray.

"This is almost as good as his story, in the way of proof, but we must have the story, if possible."

"I'll tell it, if Al. Cooper will promise," moaned the old wreck.

They set to work in haste, and improvised two stretchers, on one of which the body of Hunter was laid out, and on the other Old Wit.

This having been done, willing hands took them up and bore them back in the direction of the town, where they arrived in due season, and where the body of Hunter was turned over to the proper authorities.

During this time Jumping-Jack was not idle, and Murray now turned to him and bade him lead the way to the house to which the farmer, Cooper, had taken the mother of Baby Bess.

Jack was to the front immediately, and led the way, a considerable crowd of interested persons following, and ere long they reached the place.

There Mlle. Lucie was anxiously awaiting news of her child, and when Sam entered with Bess in his arms she gave a cry of delight and caught the little one to her breast.

And, as soon as permitted, Mrs. Cooper did the same.

The old bumner was carried in, stretcher and all, and laid down in the wide hallway.

Albert Cooper was told of the proposition he had made, and all atremble he readily agreed to it. He felt what was coming.

In fact, the way had been paved so gradually and yet so well that the news could scarcely be a shock to them, and yet, proof was needed to confirm what they suspected.

"Seems to me the promise ain't no use now," muttered the bumner, "fer I reckon I'm sent fer."

"There's a bare chance that you may get well, though," urged Bruce.

"If I thought it was all up with me, I swear I'd never open my lips about it, never in the world!"

He was encouraged, however, and, deluded with the hope that he might get well, and so, for his own protection in case he did, he proceeded with his story. Needless to say he had an attentive audience.

"I own it now, Al. Cooper," he declared. "I'm the man what stole your kid, and there she is, now known as Mademoiselle Lucie. Ye see, her name was never changed—that is to say, her first name, but I did give her another last name, to hide her 'dentity."

The mother and daughter had sprung into each other's arms.

"No wonder Baby Bess looks like I used to!" cried Lucy.

"And no wonder my heart warmed to you," responded the mother.

"Yes, it's so," confirmed Old Wit. "I hated you, Al. Cooper, and I wanted to get even with Mary fer jiltin' me; so I planned to steal your baby. I was with Cook an' Tucker's show, when it came here, seventeen years ago, an' was known as Pop Turner. If you remember, it was a few days after the show was here that Lucy was missin'. Well, I kem back an' stole her, an' we spent the first night in that old cabin where we went to-night. Then I took her on, little by little, till we overtook the show, an' there I told a reasonable story an' she was taken care of by Lucy Long, an' when she died I swore she was your mammy, Mademoiselle Lucie."

"Yes, yes, I know you did; I never believed it fully."

"And that's the long an' short of it," avowed the rascal. "Lucy took to ridin' an' soon made a name; but finally I got the bounce out of the company an' we drifted apart, an' fer years I never heard nothin' of the gal, an' could hardly believe my eyes when I seen her here to-day. That's the story, an' it's God's truth, I swear!"

It was a story that scarcely needed the proving, and yet it was easily verified.

The old bumner died before the morning.

It was a joyful reunion, needless to say.

Mrs. Cooper and her daughter were drawn together in warm affection, but to the former Baby Bess was more like the child she had lost, and to the Rose of the Ring her warmest love went forth.

As for the old farmer, he could scarcely speak, but sat and wiped the tears of joy from his eyes as fast as they blinded his vision, and he was kept at work in that manner pretty constantly. After so many years, the void in his honest heart was filled at last.

Murray had found it necessary to withdraw, to attend to his duties; and the family group was left in privacy, save for the presence of Jumping-Jack and the family of the house.

A happy hour was spent, in which it was almost forgotten that Sam Bruce was still in his clown's attire.

Baby Bess was left in the keeping of her grand-parents, until the show season should close, and the time was then near at hand.

Sam Bruce and his wife felt bound to keep their engagements to the end, but it was to be their last season on the road. They had now means ample, and had decided to buy and settle near Warrenton.

As for Jumping Jack, he went with Murray, and at last accounts was one of the very best tumblers and all-around players to be found in the sawdust arena. He could have had a home for all time with Bruce, but he still had circus on the brain, he declared, and could not give up such a chance.

As for the rascals, Taggard and Mulvern, they were punished as they deserved, and so would have been Bruce's younger brother, had he not killed himself to escape.

This younger brother had hired these two men to come to America and find and kill Sam, in order that he, the younger, might come into the estate. And, it was a scheme that might have succeeded had it not been for Jumping-Jack.

The lion was found by the men who had gone on in quest of it, on that memorable night, and was killed before it could do any further harm to any one. It was one of the biggest and fiercest of its race that had ever been taken captive, and its skin was made a present to the owner of the bloodhound.

THE END.

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